

Rapunzel of the MAGIC ITEM SHOP



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Table of Contents

Copyright

Character Page

Chapter 1: The Sorcerer at the Top of the Tower

Chapter 2: A New Family

Chapter 3: Charles's Magic Item Shop

Chapter 4: Master Charlie's Magic Lessons

Chapter 5: The Hat Ceremony

Chapter 6: Leo's Past

Chapter 7: The Day She Realized

Chapter 8: The Truth

Chapter 9: Charles's Memories

Chapter 10: Family Forever

Afterword

Other Series Pt. 1

Other Series Pt. 2

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Chapter 1: The Sorcerer at the Top of the Tower

ALL alone, a girl smiled to herself as she closed her eyes.

She sat in a small room at the very top of a tower. The room was about the size of a child's bedroom, and its stone walls gave the air a certain chill. The only pieces of furniture were a rickety bed and a single, weathered chair. No one ever visited, and she was allowed no more than one meal a day. If she asked for books, she was permitted a few, but they were always picture books or children's stories.

The girl had been locked in that room for over ten years.

"...Oh, time's up soon." An absentminded whisper spilled from her lips. She opened her eyes to dim light, then frowned a little. "I'll stop here for today, then check back in tomorrow."

On soles pitch-black with dirt, she padded barefoot to the window. It was tiny, and barely let any sunlight through.

I wish I could have listened a little longer. I guess they moved too far away.

She lightly anchored her hands on the window frame, then stretched up on her tiptoes to try to look outside. There were bars across the outer rim, so she couldn't lean out. She thought the additional barrier rather pointless since it was impossible to accidentally fall through such a narrow window.

She closed her eyes and listened carefully, but all that reached her ears was the faint whooshing of the wind.

"I thought so. I can't hear anything, although....," she trailed off. The sky was clear, and a gentle breeze carried the scent of flowers to her nose. The sweet smell reminded her that it was now spring. "Today's another lovely day. I'm sure tomorrow will be, too."

The days she received bread with what was normally just soup were good ones. Days she could hear birds singing were great ones. Today, when she sensed the arrival of spring, was an absolutely wonderful day. On top of that, she had been able to overhear a very

entertaining conversation.

“I wonder if tomorrow I’ll be able to learn what happened in the end... I do hope so.”

The girl’s favorite pastime was to listen to the people in town talk. Nobody ever came close to the tower, so birdsong was usually all she could hear from nearby. However, when she focused and put her mind to it, she could also pick up faraway voices. She didn’t know how it worked. None of the books she read described anyone with a similar ability, either, so she suspected that this talent had something to do with why she had been confined to the tower in the first place.

“I suppose it’s magic,” she mused.

Sorcerers were labeled criminals in this country. Every few decades, a single sorcerer was born, but because society believed that those with magical powers made contracts with demons before their birth, every new sorcerer was imprisoned. The girl had been brought to the tower at a young age after it became clear she had magic. They had explained to her that an arcane barrier surrounding the tower prevented her from using her powers, but she had never known how to wield them in the first place. It seemed strange to be called a sorcerer when she knew nothing about her own magic.

If it really is magic, then...

“It might not be such a bad thing after all...” she said to herself.

The townspeople’s conversations varied from day-to-day, and they were great fun to listen to. She heard children playing, elderly couples reminiscing about their youth, and small talk between shopkeepers and their customers. Once in a while, a fight or two broke out, but they were often resolved by the following afternoon.

She listened for a few hours each day. If she tried to listen for longer, a heavy fatigue overwhelmed her and made it impossible to concentrate, which could have been an effect of the barrier. Nevertheless, those few secret hours made her happy. That sense of connection to other people was what had given her the strength to live alone for so long.

Happiness. She thought of it as a melting, candy-like sweetness. She had never actually eaten candy, but that was the taste she imagined when she read about it in books.

Personally, I reckon magic’s a lot like candy.

It gave her that same sensation of lingering sugariness. After listening to the townspeople's chatter, a pleasant warmth settled in her chest, and stayed with her the whole day, lasting until she went to bed at night.

"...Achoo!"

She sneezed, and a shiver ran through her. Goosebumps were forming on her arms from standing in front of the drafty window for too long. As dusk drew nearer, the air grew colder, and the thin dress the girl wore did little to keep her warm.

She decided that it was a good time to curl up under her blanket. But just as she moved toward the bed, she heard a voice from behind her.

"Hey!" it called out, in a low tone. She whipped around to face the window again.

A brown bird with a long tail was perched on the windowsill. Considering its size, there was no way it could have squeezed through the bars. How had it gotten inside? While the girl kept her eyes trained on the bird, she heard the voice again. This time, it sounded considerably grumpier.

"I'm talking to you! Yes, *you*. Can't you hear me?" the voice said.

"Huh...? Me?" she replied, bewildered.

"Yup. I gotta say, you're pretty slow, aren't you?"

"Um... Sir Bird, are you the one talking?"

Her question was laced with doubt, but the bird was the only other living creature present, and the voice was coming from its direction. In answer, the bird opened its hooked beak, and flapped its large wings. A gust of wind blew through the room and swept the girl's hair behind her shoulders.

"It's me all right," the bird declared.

She wondered if it was normal for birds to talk. But, despite her misgivings, she was mostly just happy to speak with someone for the first time in what felt like forever.

"Did you come here to talk to me, Sir Bird?" she asked politely.

"Not exactly. I'm here to pick you up."

"Pick me up...? But, why? Where would you take me?"

"I work for a man called Master Charlie. He requires your abilities," the bird explained.

Master Charlie...? Throughout all the hours she put into her

secret hobby she had never heard anyone mention the name.

“By ‘abilities,’ do you mean...?” She hesitated, and the bird made a noise that sounded like a chuckle.

“Magic. Don’t tell me you never knew you had it.”

“That must mean I really am a sorcerer...” she said with a sense of wonder.

Actually hearing her gift called “magic” shifted something deep within her chest. Having grown up in a country where people said “criminal” instead of “sorcerer,” she felt as if this was the first time she had ever clearly seen herself.

“So, whaddya think? Are you coming with me, or would you rather stay locked up in this old tower for the rest of your life?” he asked.

The girl found his invitation incredibly tempting. If she went with him, she wouldn’t be alone anymore. Conversation would stop being something she merely listened to, and become something she could participate in.

“But...if I go with you, it’d cause trouble for people.” She cast her eyes downward as she spoke, shaking her head sadly.

“How so?”

“Someone once told me that staying locked up in here is the only thing I’m good for,” she answered.

“Nonsense!” The bird replied with a hint of dismay. “Listen up, young lady. Do you really understand the situation you’re in? Alive or dead, those people will never think any differently of you. In fact, if you disappear, I bet they’ll just be glad to be rid of you,” he spat.

She stiffened.

“If you stay here, you’ll be alone forever—never see anyone, never speak to anyone—until the day you die. Is that what you want?”

Alone forever? Until I die?

She had never truly believed she would one day be allowed to leave the tower, though she might have hoped it. And yet, when she heard that same cold, hard truth from someone else, she was suddenly struck by how much it terrified her. Chills rushed through her from head to toe.

“I...” She took a step closer, her legs shaky and unsteady.

“If you’re that worried about being useful to people, there are all sorts of things you could help out with in the outside world!” the

bird raised its voice, trying to persuade her. "Aren't you curious?"

If he's telling the truth, and there really is someone out there who wants me...

Pure curiosity welled up inside her, overflowing from the depths of her heart.

"Sir Bird, I...!" she began, but as she reached out to touch the bird's wings, an invisible force blasted her away, leaving her on her behind. When she raised her head, the bird in front of her was different from the one that had just been sitting there.

"*Uh-oh*, I can hear some sorta commotion outside. The guards must've noticed me somehow. ...Oh, my bad," he said when he noticed the girl on the floor. "I guess I knocked you away when I changed back into my original form."

The bird used his beak to help her up. There was no doubt in her mind that this bird was the same owner of the low voice, however he was now so big that he could probably carry the girl's whole bed.

"Come on, we gotta get out of here. You can ride on my back. You *are* coming with me, aren't you?" the bird said as he bobbed down politely, drawing his wings in so it would be easier for her to climb up.

"...Yes. Please take me with you, Sir Bird."

In reply, his black, round eyes narrowed, and he smiled—or at least, looked like he did.

The bird's feathers were soft and fluffy, which made sitting on his back surprisingly comfortable. She wasn't quite sure what to hold on to and grabbed some long feathers sprouting from his forehead. Apparently he didn't like that, because he promptly instructed her to wrap her arms around his neck instead. Just as they were about to leave, she realized there was a glaring flaw in his plan.

"But, how are we going to get out?" A sudden worry hit her. "The doors are locked, and they said there's a barrier around the tower—"

"From Master Charlie's perspective, you can't even call that thing a barrier. Now, are you ready? Hold on tight!" he warned her before spreading both of his wings out. Their huge span seemed to envelop the room entirely, filling the space with a whirl of feathers. Where her body was flush against his, she could feel his muscles shifting beneath the plumage.

“Here’s how you do it!” he grunted as he took off.

He kicked the floor to gain momentum, then leapt toward the tiny window. Surely, there was no way they would fit. The girl squeezed her eyes shut and braced herself for impact—but it never came. What greeted her instead was the embrace of wind and dying sunlight on her skin.

The setting sun blazed above her head. There was no floor, no walls, and no ceiling. Somehow, her body felt far lighter than it had a moment ago.

“W-We’re flying!” she exclaimed in amazement. The wind was blowing in her face, but she didn’t dare close her eyes again.

“Hahaha! That’ll give ’em something to clean up,” the bird laughed.

Sure enough, when the girl looked behind them, she saw that there was now a hole where the window had been, and the walls of the tower were crumbling down. Far below that, there were soldiers on the ground rushing around its base in a blind panic.

“The criminal’s getting away!”

“Wh-What’s with that huge bird?!”

“Is that—a roc?”

“Like the one from legend? It can’t be.”

“Never mind that! The tower’s collapsing!”

Both the tower and the soldiers’ voices faded away into the distance. The bird flew past the town and the castle before she even had a chance to process what she was seeing, until the endless blue of the ocean overtook her entire field of vision.

“This is wonderful...! I completely forgot what the outside world was like,” she marveled. She drew in the biggest breath she could, and salty sea air filled every cranny of her lungs.

“This is nothing. I mean, if my body were the world, your country would amount to no more than a single feather,” he said.

The girl had been living in a minuscule room in a tiny country; for the first time, she truly understood just how small her existence had been.

“Thank you for this, Sir Bird. I always wanted to see the outside world again.” She smiled.

“Don’t go thanking me just yet. You see that magic circle?”

Straight ahead, she saw a glowing, golden, circular pattern floating in the sky.

“That’s what a magic circle looks like?”

“Yup, and we’re gonna dive into it. It might feel a bit strange, but only for a few seconds. As it’s your first time, you’d better close your eyes,” he warned.

He began to fly even faster, and she squeezed her eyes shut as advised. The moment they plunged into the glowing ring, a most bizarre sensation overcame her. It felt as though gravity was fluctuating, or as if space itself was warping around her.

“You can open them now,” the bird said.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a vast expanse of green flourishing beneath them. The forest was so magnificent that she had to wonder if it was just as boundless as the ocean they had been flying over a moment ago.

“We’re here. There’ll be a sudden drop, so hold on tight,” the bird announced.

They landed in a clearing. She looked around to see a lovely wooden house, a little annex, a snug kitchen garden, and a well. It was a scene from a picture book, come to life. Then, she saw the slender, golden silhouette of a man standing peacefully amidst the trees, as if he were being embraced by their boughs.

The bird lowered himself so she could slide off his back. The ground was pleasantly cool under her bare feet, but completely different from the chill of the stone flooring she was used to. The soft yet sturdy feel of the earth was an entirely new sensation.

“Is this where that man you mentioned lives? Master Charlie?” she asked curiously.

“That’s right. Hey, Master Charlie!” the bird called out toward the golden silhouette, and the man turned to them.

He was tall, and young, with long, golden hair. The strands fell to his waist and shone brightly in the sunlight. He wore a long, white robe, which trailed across the ground, and looked at them with kind, jade-green eyes.

He was a strikingly beautiful man. The girl was instantly captivated by those mesmerizing eyes. For some reason, however, he also had a very familiar air about him.

“Welcome back, Ark. Is that girl...?” He gestured toward her.

“Yup. She can use magic, and she wants to help out. Just what you asked for,” the bird said, sounding pleased. At some point, he had transformed back into his smaller form, and was now perched on the man’s shoulder.



Master Charlie, as the bird called him, calmly walked toward them before kneeling in front of her. For a moment she flinched, but it seemed like he simply wanted to make proper eye contact.

"Sorry for bringing you here so suddenly. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name's Charles, though everyone here calls me Master Charlie. The bird who brought you here is Ark," he said kindly.

"I guess you could say I'm his familiar," Ark chimed in.

"I consider him more friend than familiar, but what can you do?" Charles shrugged, then got to his feet. "There's one more introduction I'd like to make—"

As if on cue, the door of the house slammed open and a small boy came rushing out.

"Master Charlie! Ark! I never said someone new could stay here!" he yelled, running toward them with a look of desperation.

His blonde hair was curly and fell in neat ringlets. His eyes were huge, like a kitten's, and his irises were the same jade-green as Charles's. The checkered vest and pants he wore suited him well, and if his expression weren't so clouded by anger, he might have even looked cute. In fact, when not angry, he was probably adorable.

"Perfect timing, Leo. I was just about to introduce you," Charles greeted him.

"Are you even listening to me, Master Charlie? I *told* you, I don't want you to get another apprentice! What's worse, this one's a *girl*!" he complained, pointing a finger at her fiercely and scowling. She didn't know for certain, but she reckoned a stray cat defending its territory would act in much the same way.

"Leo. Where are your manners?" Charles admonished him, frowning slightly.

"Don't worry, Master Charlie, he'll come around. He just gets shy in front of girls," Ark interjected, swooping off Charles's shoulder to fly around Leo instead. Leo looked irritated, swishing his hands in the air as if to shoo Ark away.

"Am not! Anyway, *you*. How old are you? What's your name?" Leo darted toward her, and she shrunk away out of sheer reflex. In that moment, a hint of his scent wafted by the tip of her nose. It recalled the fresh fragrance of young, budding leaves.

"I think I'm sixteen. And...I don't know," she admitted. She

guessed that, long ago, before she was locked up, she used to have a name. But after so many years of no one addressing her, she had forgotten it. All alone in that tower, there was no reason to have one.

“You’ve gotta be kidding. You’re four years older than me? Looking at you, I thought you were my age, or even younger. Have you even grown since you were—”

“Leo, stop it. If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it at all. Otherwise I’ll have to scold you,” Charles interrupted him. His tone was even and gentle, but his measured manner of speaking left no room for debate.

The air around him seemed to chill, and Leo visibly deflated, looking downcast and dispirited. A moment later, Charles sighed before looking back over to the girl with a rueful tilt to his eyebrows.

“I do apologize for his behavior. I hope you can forgive him,” he said.

She nodded, and Charles gave her a thankful smile. When she saw his smile, it was as if some door deep within her heart suddenly unlocked. *Familiar, kind, and warm.* She had a faint recollection of feeling the same way before—long, long ago, so far in the distant past that she couldn’t remember when or why she had felt it.

“Excuse me, but...have I ever met you before? A long time ago?” she asked.

“Me?” Charles replied. “No, this is our first time meeting.”

His expression didn’t shift in the slightest as he answered. And yet, the air seemed to change. Charles was lying. She didn’t know how she knew, but she was absolutely certain. Perhaps she could sense it thanks to her magic, but...why would he feel the need to hide something like that?

“Anyway, you’ll run into all sorts of trouble without a name. We can’t even call out to you,” he noted.

“Um... How about you give me one, Master Charlie?” she proposed, hoping it was all right to use the same title the others did.

“Oh? Is that really okay with you?”

“Whoa, that’s a huge responsibility, Master Charlie. You sure you can do this?” Ark piped up.

“You say some pretty rude stuff despite that innocent face of yours...” Charles remarked. He put a fist up to his chin, and stood

there for quite a while, mulling over suggestions. "I know. How about we take letters from the end of 'Charlie' and the beginning of 'Leo' to make Lille? It sounds cute, too," he said.

"No way. I'm not giving her half my name!" Leo shook his head vehemently, a sour look on his face.

"In that case, how about we combine Charles and Ark to make Chark? Like a shark," Charles replied.

"Master Charlie... It's not really my place to say this, but you can't give a girl such a nasty name," Ark swiftly cut in, disbelief clear in his voice. "You think so too, right, Leo?"

"Uh... I guess... Just a little bit," Leo agreed reluctantly.

"Aw..." Charles frowned disappointedly, incredulous that his idea was shut down so quickly.

"Exactly. Leo, I'm sure you can put up with her name being a little similar to yours," Ark said.

"Ugh... Fine! She can be Lille!" At last, Leo admitted defeat.

Judging by the look on his face, Charles seemed to have some mixed feelings on the matter, but eventually gave in with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Well, then... From now on, your name will be Lille. Nice to meet you, Lille," Charles said, holding out his hand. For a moment, she stared blankly at the outstretched hand, not realizing she was supposed to shake it. Then she remembered, and swiftly placed her hand in his. It was warm, firm, and large.

Lille. Lille!

She repeated the name over and over again in her head. Her chest felt wondrously warm and fuzzy.

A name... I finally have something that belongs only to me.

From that day forth, she was no longer just a girl. She was *Lille*.

Chapter 2: A New Family

LEO looked Lille up and down, and grimaced.

“Come to think of it, you’re in a horrible state. Your clothes are tattered, your face is dirty, and your hair’s all tangled. You’re not even wearing any shoes... Ark, what sort of route did you take?” he said.

“Oh, uh, I didn’t...”

Noticing how Ark’s voice suddenly turned strained and awkward, Lille answered in his place. “Leo, it’s not Sir B– ...Ark’s fault. I’ve always been like this. Is that weird?”

Year-round, she wore the same long-sleeved dress. They didn’t give her a new one until it became so tattered it was unwearable, or she otherwise grew out of it. They also hadn’t allowed her to cut her hair. She realized then just how beautiful Charles and Leo’s clothing was. Furthermore, they had silky, shiny hair, and the palms of their hands weren’t black with dirt.

Do I really look that terrible?

She grasped a handful of her long hair and swept it in front of her shoulders for inspection, but she couldn’t tell if it looked bad or not.

“Not exactly *weird*, just...,” Leo trailed off.

His gaze wasn’t quite so aggressive now. In fact, he looked distressed, or even sad. Lille felt she lacked the vocabulary to put the right word to his expression.

“Isn’t there something you should say, Leo?” Charles said, placing a hand atop Leo’s head.

“...Sorry,” he apologized. “That was kinda mean of me.”

Lille shook her head as if to say it was nothing, but truly, she couldn’t tell whether what he had said was mean or not. Should she feel upset? She was so overjoyed at the fact that she was having a conversation that she didn’t care if it was a nice one or not, and her other emotions were struggling to catch up.

“Anyway, why did you call Ark ‘Sir,’ but not me?!” Leo pouted, indignant.

"I think she's got the right idea. You're younger than her, while I'm much older. Probably even older than Master Charlie," Ark said triumphantly.

Lille suspected it wasn't an issue of age; Leo simply didn't like being left out. "Then, how about I call you Little Leo?" she suggested, trying to think of a nickname that would suit him.

Leo gaped at her, speechless.

"Um, yes...?" she asked uncertainly.

"Ugh, forget it! I'll just be Leo," he spat, heaving an exaggerated sigh.

"Oh, right." Charles intervened before the conversation derailed further. "If you like, now would actually be a good time for you to take a bath, Lille. It'll only get colder as the evening draws on. I can get you a change of clothes, too," he offered.

"Good idea. But won't it take a while to get the bath ready?" Ark asked.

"No, it's fine. I already heated the water for her," Charles said, before turning to the bird and the boy with a look that meant business. "Ark—show her the way. Leo—help me out with dinner preparations."

They both nodded, and replied at the same time:

"Okay!"

"Got it."

Charles proceeded to open the door to the cozy, red-roofed house, and when Lille stepped inside, she saw an open, spacious room filled with furniture. There was a hearth, a sofa, a large dining table, and a perch, which was most likely meant for Ark. Farther inside, it looked like there was a kitchen, too. The walls, floor, and furniture were all constructed from the same material: a warm, amber-colored wood. The room was simple in design, but bright and cheerful nonetheless.

Charles and Leo headed toward the kitchen, while Lille followed Ark down the corridor that branched off from the living room. As she walked along the hall, she noted numerous doors to other rooms; the house was much bigger than the exterior suggested.

"Ark...do you think it's true that Master Charlie doesn't know who I am?" she asked.

"Yup. I mean, I'm pretty sure he's never been to your country. All he told me was he'd heard of a country that imprisons sorcerers,

so we should rescue you and invite you to work here.”

“Oh, I see. I wonder how I can help,” Lille worried.

“I’m sure Master Charlie will tell you all about that in due time. Ah—about Leo...,” Ark paused mid-sentence and swooped around to perch on Lille’s shoulder. In a hushed tone, he whispered, “He hates the thought of Master Charlie being taken away from him. That’s why he’s sulking so much. He can be harsh sometimes, but he’s a good kid. You don’t hate him for all the rude things he says, do you?”

“No, of course not. It’s easy to see that Leo’s a nice boy,” she assured him.

“Phew, that’s a relief. Anyway, you must be pretty cold by now, huh? Enjoy your bath.”

“Thank you. I will.” Lille smiled.

“Here we are; this is the bathroom. I’ll leave you to it,” Ark said as he stopped Lille in front of one of the doors. Satisfied he’d performed his duty, Ark flew away, leaving Lille on her own.

Carefully, she pushed the door open, her heart pounding. It revealed what looked like a changing room. She supposed it was a good idea to take off her dress, to start.

Once she was naked, she wandered toward a sliding door, reasoning that was where the bath would be. Pulling the door to the side, she could see tendrils of warm steam floating up into the air. The bathroom was different than how she imagined it. The bath itself looked like a huge bucket, full of hot water, and there were bottles full of colored liquids placed around it. She picked up something that looked like a gemstone, but when she smelled it, it had a nice, fresh scent, which meant that it was probably soap.

She had never washed herself in such a large basin of water. Usually, she would wipe herself down with a steaming hot towel. Occasionally, she was granted a bucket filled with warm water to wash her hair, but that was as good as it got.

What should I do? I don’t know how to use any of these things...

Luckily, she heard Charles entering the changing room with some clothes for her, so she slid open the bathroom door to ask him for help.

“Excuse me, Master Charlie?”

“Hm...? Wh-Whoa!” Charles yelped in surprise when he turned around to see Lille. He clapped both of his hands over his face, completely flustered. His face turned a deep red, the blush

spreading up to his ears. "Lille! P-Put some clothes on!" he exclaimed.

"Huh? But I'm about to get in the bath," she replied, confused.

"Well, yes, but...!" Charles floundered.

Why's he in such a panic? Is he embarrassed about something?

Lille didn't know what all the fuss was about, and she was preoccupied with her own problem.

"The thing is...I don't know how to use a bath," she admitted.

"What? Really?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Would you come in here with me? So you can show me what to do?" she asked.

"L-Lille, what on earth are you saying? Of course I can't. You're a young lady, and I'm a man. It'd be inappropriate." He shook his head in disbelief.

At last, Lille understood the source of Charles's discomfort: apparently, bathing was usually something done alone. It seemed like a waste to go in separately, though, when the bath was so big.

"Okay, then what should I do?" Her eyebrows knitted together.

"Ark...wouldn't be very useful, since his claws aren't very dexterous, and Leo... Well, in his case, there are far too many things that could go wrong," Charles said, speaking with his back to Lille. Although he seemed deep in thought, the tips of his ears were still bright red. "...I've got an idea," he announced, before leaving the bathroom momentarily.

When he returned, Lille's eyes widened in alarm.

"Surely you can't see a thing, like that! Master Charlie—"

"That's the point. I know roughly where everything is, and I can sense any objects that are imbued with magic. We'll be fine like this," he explained. He was still fully dressed but had tied a piece of cloth over his eyes, which must have been what he hurried away to fetch.

"First, let's give your hair a good wash. There's a small chair somewhere around here, so go sit on that," he instructed. Then he picked up a translucent, ruby-like bar of soap, and used it to lather a wet sponge. Within seconds, a layer of gentle, sweet-scented bubbles formed on its surface. "All right. Now, use this sponge to scrub your body. You know how to do that, right?"

"Yes. Should I do the same to my hair?"

"For hair, you should use the liquid soap in that bottle, but... do you know how to wash it?"

“No...” She thought back. “I’ve only ever rinsed it with water.”

“...I guess we’re out of other options. All right—I’ll wash your hair today, so make sure you pay attention. Next time, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

Though he couldn’t physically see, Charles easily reached over to the liquid soap and nimbly poured some into his palm. He briefly rubbed his hands together before massaging the soap into Lille’s hair. It made a *swish, swish* noise as he worked it into her scalp with his fingertips. The sensation was marvelous; she fought sleepiness as she basked under his warm, calming touch.

“You have to rub your hair to make the soap lather up,” he said, showing her. “Take care not to get it in your eyes, or else they’ll sting,”

Once both her body and hair were covered in soap, Charles used a small pail to scoop up some water and rinse the bubbles away. He taught Lille that the huge, bucket-like container was called a bathtub.

“Now, you can soak in the bathtub for as long as you like.” He gestured toward it before turning his head toward the little glass bottles placed to the side. “Say, Lille—what’s your favorite floral scent?”

“Oh! I like anything sweet,” she told him.

“In that case, I think this one’ll be perfect for you,” he said, picking up one of the bottles and pouring some of the gloopy liquid into the bathwater. “It’s bath oil. I make them myself. It warms you up, and I use magic to give it some added benefits. You can try them all out, eventually, to see what they do,” he explained. “Well, I think that’s everything. I’ll leave you to relax, Lille.”

She happened to glance down and saw that the bottom of his robe was completely soaked. His sleeves were covered in soap, too. As he walked away, stumbling slightly on the robe’s wet hem, a strange sensation settled in her chest.

She hadn’t done a single thing to help out since arriving, but Charles was nothing but kind to her, regardless. He had given her a name and taught her how to bathe. Something soft in his gaze told her his kindness was unconditional. She sank lower, until the surface of the water lapped at her chin, enjoying the sweet floral fragrance that hung in the air.

It feels like someone’s squeezing my heart.

She didn’t think it right to call the feeling painful or sore; the

sensation was in no way unpleasant. It was a sweet, miraculous pang that she wished she could savor forever.

When she left the bath and glimpsed herself in the changing room mirror, a girl she had never seen before stared back at her. The reflection showed an awfully thin girl with long, straw-colored hair, and big, emerald-green eyes. She had totally forgotten what color they were. In the tower, she never had a mirror—but even if she had, there would have been nothing to see but her dirt-stained face and hair. It wouldn't have been worth looking at.

In the pile of clothes that Charles had brought her, she found an unbleached, long-sleeved dress. It looked loose and comfortable—just like Charles's robe—and intricate embroidery curled around the hems and neckline. Once she pulled it on, the dress hid her bony arms and legs, and she dared to think that perhaps she now looked just as elegant as Charles and Leo.

After wiggling her toes into the high-laced boots Charles had given her, she left the bathroom the way she came. Once she found her way back to the living room, she walked through the doorway to see everyone already there.

"Um... I'm done," Lille announced shyly.

"Ah! How was i—"

The three of them fell silent when they turned to look at her. Their eyes were so wide with shock that Lille started to worry that she'd somehow put her clothes on wrong.

"Oh... Have I done something silly again?" she asked.

"...No, no. We're just stunned by how pretty you are," Ark said, impressed.

"Anyone would be after seeing her with all that dirt caked on!" Leo threw in.

"Th-Thank you," she said, not used to being complimented—or half-complimented, in Leo's case. She was relieved that she looked presentable but was unnerved by the way Charles was still dazedly staring at her.

"Master Charlie...?" she ventured uncertainly.

He suddenly shook himself. "Oh, sorry about that," he apologized. "I couldn't help but stare. You really are cute."

It felt as though a burst of hot air had swept over her cheeks.

Cute.

No one had ever called her that before. She couldn't believe how such a short word could make her feel like she was soaring.

She wondered if Charles, being a sorcerer, could see what appeared to be a pink mist currently evaporating off her skin. Hopefully, neither he nor the others noticed it, though she didn't know why she felt so self-conscious about it in the first place.

"I made you those clothes by shrinking one of my robes. Luckily, it looks like I got the sizing just right," he said, appraising the dress. "Sorry to give you hand-me-downs. Ah, but the boots are new, actually. I bought them for Leo just recently."

"No, it's fine. Thank you both very much." She looked between Charles and Leo.

"It's no big deal... Besides, if I refused to give a pair of shoes to someone walking around barefoot, I'd look like a jerk." Leo crossed his arms.

"Leo, you gotta be more honest about your feelings. How often do you hang out with girls your age? Now's your chance," Ark quipped.

Leo pouted. "Shut up."

So this used to belong to Master Charlie...

For the first time, she discovered how reassuring it was to wear something passed down from somebody else; it felt as though Charles was folding her in an embrace. The gentle scent of the fabric was probably what he—

"It's great that you're all washed up, but shouldn't we do something about your hair?" Leo sauntered over, reaching out to touch it. "It's way too long. The sooner you cut it, the bet—"

"No!" she shouted, slapping his hand away. She grabbed the ends of her hair with both hands, and water droplets splattered onto the floor as she clenched her fists.

"Wh-What the hell? It's not like I'd force you to cut it." Leo blinked. "You sure are touchy."

"I'm sorry..." Lille said, embarrassed.

At the tower she had been told that if she cut her hair, her magical powers would go berserk and wreak all sorts of havoc, which was why she had never been allowed to cut it. But given how Leo spoke about cutting it so nonchalantly, that claim most likely wasn't true. Still, *if* something were to happen, she could never forgive herself. The risk scared her, and she especially wanted to avoid causing problems for Charles, Leo, and Ark.

"If you don't want to cut it, you can just put it up," Charles suggested. "I know—if you put it in braids, it won't get in the way."

He smiled, trying to assuage her fear.

"Come to think of it, why is *your* hair so long, Master Charlie?" she asked, peering at where it fell down his back.

"I suppose it's just a pain to cut, though I do also consider it a sort of penitence to the gods. Plus, it helps keep me warm in winter," he mused. "Do you think I should cut mine too, Leo?"

"It's fine like that," Leo huffed, resting his chin in his hands.

"Sorry, but...how do I braid it?" As soon as she asked, Leo sighed with a tired look on his face. Lille was quickly beginning to learn his default reactions.

"Oh, right. To be honest, I don't know much about braiding hair either, so maybe Leo can help you out," Charles said, nodding his head toward the boy.

"*Me?!*" he exclaimed, incredulous.

"Yes, *you*. You've been extremely rude to Lille ever since she arrived. It's only fair." Charles shrugged.

"...Ugh, fine!" Leo reluctantly agreed. "I'll go get a brush and some hair ties. You sit there!" he fumed, pointing sharply at an empty chair.

"Meanwhile, I'll help you dry your hair," Charles said kindly. "If you leave it wet like that, you could catch a cold." When he softly touched her hair from behind, a gust of warm air rushed around her head. "There."

His touch lingered for a moment before fading. When she brought her fingertips to her hair, it was completely dry. Not a moment earlier, it had been dripping wet.

"Was that magic...?" she asked in wonder, half-convinced she was dreaming as she kept her eyes trained on Charles.

Leo came rushing back into the living room. "I took some ribbon from your shop, Master Charlie. You don't mind, right?" Leo asked, clutching a box in his hands.

"Sure, it's fine. What did you choose?"

"I had no idea what to get, so I picked up a load of different ones," he said, dropping the box onto the table. Inside there was a collection of long, shiny strings of varying colors.

So that's what ribbon looks like.

"You can let Lille choose. Lille, what would you like?" Charles asked gently.

But she wasn't sure she could choose even if she wanted to. She didn't know the first thing about ribbons. She picked up the

thin pieces of fabric one by one. Some of them were slippery to the touch, and others were more coarse.

Seeing her confusion, Charles helpfully explained, "You can choose whatever you like the look of. Are you drawn to any of the colors or styles?"

She thought on it for a while before taking one between her fingers. She didn't know if it would suit her, but the color gave her a nice feeling.

"Jade green, huh? Good choice. I think it complements the color of your hair."

It was the same green as Charles's eyes—the same color as the shimmering forest she'd seen from the sky. And she did seem to feel a natural affinity toward it.

"Now that that's settled, I'm gonna start. Sit still," Leo instructed her, pulling his own chair behind Lille's. He began to drag the brush through her hair.

"Jeez, how long has it been since you last combed it? It's looking better since you washed it, but it's still gonna take a while to untangle," Leo grumbled.

"Umm..." she thought back. "About ten years?"

He furrowed his eyebrows. "...That's got to be a joke. It is a joke, right?"

However, despite his complaints, he continued to brush her hair. At first, he had to pull with all his might, but as her hair gradually untangled, his strokes grew gentler. Out of curiosity, she shook her head a little, and silky strands of hair caressed her cheeks.

"Hey, I told you to sit still," Leo huffed. "I'm gonna start braiding now, so when I say sit still, I *mean* it. It'll take ages to separate it into two braids, so let's just do one big one."

She could feel him moving her hair in an intricate pattern at the back of her head. She wished she could see what he was doing, and although she was tempted to twist around for a glimpse, she managed to fight the urge and sit quietly.

"You've got talent there, kid," Ark remarked.

"I think so, too. Perhaps I should ask him to do mine as well," Charles said as he peered at Leo's handiwork.

"I used to do this for my little sister a lot—that's all," Leo explained. "...All right. Now, to tie the ribbon, and...done!" he announced before standing up from his chair.

Lille grasped the thick braid hanging down her back and tugged it over her shoulder to look at it. The ribbon she had chosen was tied around the very end. The knot looked like a little green butterfly.

She stood up. First, she tried shaking her head. Then, she walked around in a circle. The braid followed her, almost like a tail. With her hair secured, it was far easier to move around.

"I knew it'd look great on you. You're adorable," Charles commented.

"Hey, now. She's not a dog," Leo said in disdain. While he was distracted, Lille reached for his hand. He jolted at the touch and stared at her with a look of surprise.

"Thank you, Leo." She smiled.

"...It's fine," he mumbled shyly, and in that moment, Lille sensed his walls lower ever so slightly.

"That ribbon isn't enchanted with any magic yet. Since this is a special occasion, all the more reason to fix that," Charles said, moving toward Lille.

He took hold of the braid and brought his lips close to the ribbon at the end. He slowly blew across it, and for an instant, Lille could have sworn she saw the ribbon shine with warm light. But in a blink of an eye, the light was gone, and she wondered if she had imagined it.

"...Master Charlie, what exactly did you enchant it with? I couldn't really see from here," Leo asked curiously.

"Well...it's a secret." Charles grinned, evading the question, his expression unreadable. Leo eyed him dubiously. "Anyway—the sun's starting to set, so we should eat dinner now. I expect you're hungry, Lille."

With a flick of his finger, Charles swept his hand through the air as if he were pulling on an invisible string. As he did, forks, knives, and platefuls of food came floating into the living room from the kitchen. Lille watched him carefully, trying to figure out how he was doing that. The tableware neatly fell into its rightful place on the dining table, ready to be used.

When Lille heard the word 'dinner,' the image of a half-empty bowl of soup and singular, hard piece of bread came to mind. In this house, it was different. There were so many plates lined up on the table that she could hardly believe her eyes. There was pottage, some sort of meat dish, a fruit pie... Not to mention, the bread

basket was piled high.

Charles and Leo had prepared drinks, too; there was a bottle full of some sort of liquid, and the color indicated that it was definitely not water.

"Is this for the whole week?" she asked in disbelief.

"No, Lille. There's enough here for three people and one bird, so eat as much as you like," Charles said. "Especially since you're a growing girl."

The strange-colored beverage was called "wine," but only adults were allowed to drink it. Lille was promptly redirected to the fruit juice, and Charles poured her a cup.

"I was the one who made most of this, so you'd better eat it all!" Leo barked.

"Wow, Leo. You made all this? That's amazing." She beamed at him.

"I'm terrible at cooking. I feel bad that I can only help a little, but I really am hopeless," Charles chuckled, scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment.

"Seriously. It'd be a load off my shoulders if you're any good at it," Leo sighed, looking toward Lille.

"Okay, I'll bear that in mind," Lille replied.

"Good. All right, let's dig in."

Leo described each of the dishes lined up on the table to her as if Lille was already his culinary protégé. With his mouth full of food, he pointed out the potato pottage, and the sautéed chicken with orange sauce. Ark had nimbly dug his claws into a cut of meat and was pecking away at it.

She wanted to taste a little of all the dishes, but before she knew it, she was too full to take another bite.

"Are you already done eating?" Leo looked disappointed. "Master Charlie told me to prepare a grand feast, but now the extra helpings are gonna go to waste."

"Lille can't help that she's not used to portions this size," Charles said, defending her.

Still, she felt guilty about not finishing the food Leo had worked so hard to prepare. "...I can eat some more," she said, trying to convince herself as well as the others.

"No, I wasn't trying to force you. You can just save the leftovers for breakfast tomorrow, right?" Leo shrugged.

"...All right, then," she conceded. Even talking was hard work;

her stomach felt like it might burst. Her body felt uncomfortably heavy from eating so much at once, to the point that she doubted she could move if she tried. On top of that, a sudden tiredness had overtaken her.

“Lille, are you sleepy?” Charles asked, noticing that she kept rubbing her eyes and was starting to nod off.

“Why would I fall asleep from a full stomach...? I’m not a baby,” she protested.

“It’s been a very eventful day, so no wonder you’re tired. Don’t force yourself to stay awake. Besides, you’ve already taken a bath, so you might as well head to bed. I’ll show you to your room,” he replied.

“I wanted you to help with cleaning up, but I guess today’s a no-go. Starting tomorrow, I’ll put you to work for real,” Leo told her.

“I’ll sleep in Lille’s room with her tonight,” Ark offered.

Charles smiled. “That’s a good idea, Ark. Thanks.”

Meanwhile, Lille struggled to get off her chair. Her limbs weren’t moving in the way she expected, and when she stood up from the table, she almost tripped. Luckily, Charles caught her, appearing at her side in an instant

“...Whoops. Are you okay, Lille?” he asked, worried.

“Maybe it’d be better to carry her there,” Ark suggested.

“You’re right. Lille, do you mind if I pick you up?”

“...No,” she replied.

With a quick word of warning, Charles easily lifted her into the air. For a moment, she was startled by how much higher her perspective suddenly was, but the sturdy support of Charles’s arms and chest reassured her. Enveloped in his warmth, she felt like she could drop off to sleep right then and there.

With each step, his arms gently rocked back and forth, cradle-like. The same scent she had smelled on her dress radiated from him, and she nuzzled the tip of her nose into his chest. It was an enchantingly calming scent.

“This is your room. Is it okay if I put you down on the bed? That way, I can help you unlace your boots,” Charles said.

She nodded, and a moment later her body sank into a soft mattress. Compared to the hard, rickety bed she’d slept on until now, this one was like a dream—as if the sheets were holding her in a safe hug. It was impossible to keep her eyes open.

“Hey, Master Charlie. I know Lille was locked up for a long time, but her parents raised her until she was about six, right? Isn’t it kinda extreme that she forgot how to take a bath or tie her hair?” Ark asked thoughtfully.

“That’s what I thought, too. They were probably drugging her with something.” Charles frowned. “To make her memories vague, to suppress her emotions... That sort of thing.”

“So, they wanted to make her easier to control, huh? I don’t think they totally suppressed her emotions, though. Even if she does have a pretty childlike way of expressing them,” Ark said, thinking back over the events of the day.

“Indeed. That’s probably because...” Charles trailed off. “It looks like she’s falling asleep. We can talk about this more tomorrow,” he decided.

She had a vague sense that Charles tucked her beneath a blanket. She wanted to grab his hand tightly to stop him from leaving, but her eyelids weighed like lead.

“Goodnight, Lille. I hope some happy memories come back to you, even if they’re just small ones. Blessings on your rest,” Charles said, tracing his fingertips across her forehead. Or at least, Lille thought he did. She didn’t have a chance to lean into his lingering touch, though: listening to the faint rustling of Charles’s robe, she fell into a long, deep sleep.



THAT night, she had a dream. It was a happy dream, full of a sweet, creamy fragrance, and covered in a pure white haze.

In the dream, Lille had a family. She had a kind, gentle mother; a cheerful, dependable father; and a mouthy little brother. Her grandfather was strict, but he spoiled her the most. She loved them dearly, and yet she’d forgotten. She’d forgotten how she loved her mother’s apple pie. The pink dress she liked to wear. The cat she looked after.

Her family had never been wealthy, but their simple life was blissful nonetheless.

Even when they realized Lille had magic, and soldiers came to take her away, they fought for her. Lille, however, fearing her family’s execution if they didn’t hand her over, went with the

soldiers willingly. Her family cried, but Lille was glad to sacrifice herself if it saved them from harm. As long as they were still out there living their lives to the fullest, she was content.

How could she have forgotten them? Six years' worth of memories, buried in the dark depths of her mind like treasure.

Amidst the creamy scent, she could perceive what smelled like sunshine on damp earth. By the time she realized it was Charles's smell, she was already long gone from the world of dreams.



LILLE woke to birdsong and the muted light of the morning sun filtering through a gap in the curtains. Ark was perched on one of the bedposts. She had fallen asleep at sunset, which meant she had been sleeping for over twelve hours. The last time she'd slept so soundly was probably ten years ago.

"Good morning, Ark," she said, yawning.

"Morning. Did you sleep well?"

"I did." She nodded, then stretched, chasing the stiffness from her limbs, before getting out of bed. Now she was awake enough to have a proper look at the room. It was small and cozy, with a bed, a chest of drawers, and a writing desk.

"So, this room..."

"Is yours. Master Charlie got it ready for you before I went to the tower," Ark explained.

"For me..." she said, touched.

Although it was similar in size to her room at the tower, this room was much warmer, and all the more so given the knowledge that Charles had prepared it especially for her. The window allowed in a lot of light, and the wooden furniture was bright. She could tell Charles had decorated with a girl in mind; both the bed linens and curtains were adorned with lace frills.

"Master Charlie said he'd never met me before," she said, doubt in her tone.

"Yup," Ark agreed, bobbing his head.

"Doesn't that mean he knew nothing about me until yesterday?"

"I think so. How come?"

"...Never mind." Lille shook her head.

Master Charlie might have known there was a sorcerer imprisoned in the tower, but how did he know I was a girl?

Clearly, her intuition that Charles had been lying wasn't completely unfounded. Although she didn't know why he was hiding the truth, the fact that he was made her think that it would be best to keep quiet. In the meantime, it was possible she would remember something on her own—the same way she had remembered her family in her dreams the night before.

Once Ark left the room, she went to the bathroom, and used the remaining bathwater to wash her face. The braid that Leo had worked so hard on had come undone, so she used a hand mirror and brush she found in her room to try to fix it. She attempted a braid of her own, but it came out looking misshapen and messy. She probably tied the ribbon all wrong, too.

She heard a knock at the door.

"Yes?" she called over her shoulder.

"Are you up? Come help me with breakfast," Leo said through the door. His voice was lower and slightly hoarser than it had been the previous day, suggesting he'd just woken up.

"Oh, Leo! Wait a moment. I'd like your help with something," Lille said.

After a moment, Leo let himself into the room, looking displeased. "...What is it now?"

"I don't think I did this braid very well." She gestured to her hair.

With a huge, exaggerated sigh, he moved behind her. "Give me the brush," he huffed. Though he *sounded* irritated, he dutifully took over, styling her hair into a neat braid. "You should practice braiding your hair at night, before you go to bed."

"Oh, okay. Thank you."

Once he was done, Lille followed Leo to the kitchen. He swiftly instructed her to wash some vegetables and crack the eggs. She was grateful that he was giving her simple jobs that didn't require any special knowledge. Leo used magic to light the fire beneath the stove. She wondered if she'd soon be able to do things like that, too.

"Your magic's really impressive, Leo," she remarked.

"Well, of course. I am Master Charlie's *top* apprentice, after all," he boasted, puffing out his chest.

At the mention of his name, Lille realized she hadn't seen Charles that morning whatsoever. She could sense that he was

nearby, though, and for some reason, part of her selfishly wished he had been the first person she said good morning to.

"Is Master Charlie still sleeping?" she asked Leo.

"He's outside, working on the kitchen garden with Ark." Leo tipped his head in the direction of the window. "By the way, cooking isn't the only thing he's hopeless at. He sucks at all kinds of housework, so us two'll be in charge of the laundry and cleaning. Sometimes he tries to help, but it's kind of a waste of time."

"Oh dear," Lille said, sympathetic.

"Magic is just about the only thing he *can* do, but that's geniuses for you," Leo sighed. Lille didn't know the first thing about what geniuses could or couldn't do, but Leo said it with such confidence that she believed him. "His bedroom is super messy, but he claims that if I tidied it, he won't know where things are anymore. Once, I got fed up and did it anyway, but generally, he won't let us in there. Just thinking about that warzone makes my skin crawl." He shivered.

"O-Oh my." She blinked. She never would have guessed it from looking at him, but Leo was apparently more industrious than even a housewife, and was perhaps akin to some sort of housework demon.

"Hey, Leo..." Lille began. "Is Master Charlie a really powerful sorcerer? It sounds like he might be."

Now that she had a chance to bring it up, Lille asked what had been floating at the back of her mind ever since the previous day. Charles didn't act as though he were better than anyone else, nor seem like he bossed anyone around. However, he *did* have two apprentices, as well as a familiar.

Leo gaped. "Don't you know anything? Master Charlie's super famous."

"Really?"

"Really. I bet there's not a single person on this continent who doesn't know about him. Some years back, he saved countless people by stopping a sorcery war just before it happened. They gave him a cash reward big enough to cover his living expenses for his entire life. That was when he decided to use the money to live a quiet life out here," he explained.

"A sorcery...war?" The words tasted sour on her tongue. She couldn't imagine magical warfare but knew it would be a terrible thing should it happen, that could ruthlessly take thousands of lives.

“You don’t even know about *that*?”

“In my country, sorcerers were rare, so...,” she trailed off. She opted not to tell him they were also criminals.

“Really? Where I was born, sorcerers make up over half the population. I guess it’s not like that everywhere, huh?” he marveled.

Lille had noticed that Leo had a lot to say when he spoke about Charles, and his tone grew much gentler. She figured continuing to talk about Charles would be a good way to get closer to Leo, but she was immediately interrupted.

“Say, Leo. Is Master Charlie—?”

“Peel this.”

“Huh? I’ve never peeled anything before,” she said, floundering when a potato and knife were suddenly thrust into her hands.

“I’ll teach you, so think of it as practice.”

Peeling the wonky, angular parts of the potato was rather difficult. If the knife were to slip, she could cut her fingers, so she stopped talking in order to fully focus on her hands.

“D-Done,” she finally announced.

For breakfast, Leo made potato omelets in tomato sauce with vinegar. He put out some bread as a side dish, with the leftover chicken salad from the night before. He and Lille also got out last night’s cherry pie, for dessert. Under Leo’s guidance, the meal came together before Lille knew it. She had wanted to watch Leo work, but never got the chance. Still, knowing that she’d helped, she blushed as a solid sense of achievement rose high inside her.

She smiled. “Cooking’s fun.”

“Sure, but you can’t *really* call what you just did ‘cooking,’ although you do show some potential,” he said as he appraised her.

“I’ll do my best,” she promised.

“Great. I hope you’ll have the same amount of enthusiasm at lunch and dinner, too,” he said in return.

Just as they were carrying the dishes over to the table, Charles and Ark came in through the back door, covered in mud. Sensibly, Charles didn’t wear his signature robe while gardening, and instead wore a simple shirt and pants held up by suspenders. He had also tied his long hair back in a ponytail. Ark flew onto his perch, and started grooming his wing feathers, looking satisfied.

“Does Ark help out in the garden, too?” Lille asked cheerfully.

"Yeah. He eats bugs, which really helps the plants. Plus, I'm not good with them," Charles explained.

"He...eats bugs, huh...?"

She looked at Ark. Of course, she shouldn't have been surprised, since most birds ate bugs. But, when she thought back, she remembered him eating chicken at dinner. Wasn't that rather like cannibalism?

Ark was a bird of many mysteries.

"Did you have any nice dreams last night, Lille?" Charles asked once they were all seated at the table.

"Oh, yes." She nodded. "I remembered all sorts of things, like my family, and my favorite things. It was a truly lovely dream."

"That's great to hear," he replied.

"What was your family like?" Leo chimed in.

"I lived with my mother, father, grandfather, and little brother. I think I had a cat, too. Also..." she paused, looking at each of their faces. "They were a lot like you."

Charles blinked. "Like us?"

"Yes. For example, the way Ark's so composed and reliable reminds me of my father. And my little brother was a sweet-looking boy with a cheeky side to him."

"Wait a sec. You're trying to say I'm like him, right?" Leo interjected.

"So, that must mean...I'm the mother?" Charles deduced. Lille looked at the two of them before nodding, to which Ark responded with a howl of laughter.

Charles smiled. "I'm flattered."

"I'm not!" Leo huffed.

"To be honest, I have mixed feelings about it as well..." She frowned. Perhaps because it didn't feel right to compare the family in her dream to the people she was living with now.

I'm sure I'll come to love all of them. No—they're already becoming a beloved family to me.

She wondered what was in store for her in the future. Her chest grew warm and fuzzy as she looked between Leo, who was angrily grumbling about something; Ark, who was teasing Leo; and Charles, who was watching both of them with a gentle smile on his face. Eventually, her own lips relaxed into a happy smile, too.

Chapter 3: Charles's Magic Item Shop

AFTER breakfast, Leo taught Lille how to brew tea. Under Leo's instruction, she made a pot of apple tea, and they sat drinking it while they digested.

"Master Charlie," Lille began. She had waited until both of their teacups were empty to broach the subject. "When Ark rescued me, he said you needed my help, but...with what? The housework?"

"No." He shook his head, smiling. "If that was what I needed, I wouldn't have specifically asked for a sorcerer. No—I need you for something else entirely."

Something else?

She gazed at Charles, unsuccessfully trying to come up with a guess.

Eventually, Charles stood up from the table, maintaining eye contact with her all the while. "...All right," he conceded. "I had been planning to tell you once I was sure you were used to living here, but I suppose you're ready. Come with me."

As Lille obediently followed him, she realized he was heading toward the annex, which was connected to the house by an outdoor walkway. She had been intrigued by the small building since the day before. She noticed that apart from the door that opened to the walkway, it also had a front entrance around the other side. There weren't any sign boards or posters, but judging by the layout, it appeared to be some type of shop.

Charles strode down the covered passageway, and Lille shuffled behind him. He came to a stop just before the door to the outbuilding, then turned to face her.

"Go on," he urged her, gesturing toward the door. Slightly nervous, she stepped forward and hesitantly opened it. Instantly, the smell of old books engulfed her nostrils. She squinted in the dim light, and a room full of mysterious trinkets revealed itself.

Bookcases as high as the ceiling towered over the room, and they were crammed with thick tomes, their spines decorated with symbols she had never seen before. The walls were adorned with

clocks of various sizes, and unusual clumps of grass hung from the ceiling in addition to some lampshades. Small glass bottles and ornaments were haphazardly lined up along the shelves. Some glowed with faint light, while others bubbled thickly.

Timidly, Lille stepped inside. She could see a crowd of items littered across the table in the middle of the room, but she hadn't the faintest clue what they were. Even with the overhead lights turned on, the store was dim, suffused with a dusk-like orange glow rather than the morning sun's radiance.

"Welcome to Charles's Magic Item Shop!" Charles announced, throwing both of his arms outward before taking a theatrical bow.



“Magic...items?” Lille queried dubiously.

“That’s right. I’ve always loved inventing new concoctions and tools, so it was my dream to open this shop if I ever started a new life,” he said cheerfully. Somehow, in the shop, Charles seemed more lively than usual.

“So, what do you need help with? Sales assistants?” Lille guessed.

“Well...” His face contorted in hesitation.

Ark flew in then and landed on top of the table. “No one ever buys anything,” Ark supplied bluntly.

“Hey! You’re so tactless!” Charles complained.

“Master Charlie has absolutely no artistic flair or sense for customer service, so it’s rare that anyone even comes inside. I mean, what do you think this is?”

Ark used his beak to indicate a small brown bag tied at the top with a leather strap, and a can with some strange-colored leaves stuffed inside. She opened the can slightly, but immediately retreated when she smelled an unpleasant, peculiar stench.

“Umm... Medicinal herbs?” she hazarded.

“I had a go at making some products aimed at women. They were supposed to be potpourri for sweet dreams, and some tea for deep sleep...” Charles explained, looking harrowed.

Ark glanced back over at Lille and said, “See what I mean?” He inclined his head to one side, giving Lille a meaningful look. She felt sorry for Charles, but she could admit Ark definitely had a point.

“He makes a bunch of weird stuff. Clocks that cackle like witches when the hour strikes twelve, music boxes that sing like sirens, laughing bags that scream like mandrakes... I’ve seen it all. A girl your age would probably have a better idea of what young people like, right?” Ark ventured.

“Yes, I think so,” Lille replied. “For example, you could put the potpourri in a lace bag and tie it up with a ribbon. For the tea, you could add more petals, and sell it with some cute, colorful sugar cubes. You also might want to work on the fragrance some more,” she shyly offered.

Charles’s eyes began to sparkle as he listened. “You’re right...!” He beamed. “If we enchanted the ribbon too, the magic would be even stronger. And if we sell the tea in sets, we could

combine different types of tea with different sugar cubes to create all sorts of effects... I couldn't have come up with this on my own."

He scrambled to find a piece of parchment and quill on the disorderly table, then began to write, muttering under his breath.

"Lille," he called suddenly, setting his quill down and taking a deep breath. When he looked up at her, his eyes were full of hope, and he clasped her hands between his own.

"Y-Yes?" she replied.

"Ark chose the right person. With you here, I feel like people will actually start coming to the shop." He smiled. "Please...would you help me?"

"Yes, of course." She nodded resolutely, squeezing his hands in return.

She was happy that there was something she could do for him. She desperately wanted to be useful; she believed helping people was a wonderful thing to do—but, truth be told, she found she was especially eager to help Charles.

"All right. Now that that's settled, would you like to go into town today?" Charles clapped his hands together, looking excited.

"Isn't it a bit early for our monthly shopping trip?" Ark asked.

"Yeah, but Lille needs some more clothes. It's not fair to force her to wear secondhand dresses all the time, and I didn't know her size before she got here, so I couldn't buy anything in advance. Plus, we need materials to redecorate the shop."

"True. I suppose girls need all sorts of clothes," Ark agreed.

"I'll let Leo know," Charles said. "Let's meet back here again once you're both ready."

"O-Okay!" she responded out of habit, but she didn't know what else she could do to prepare. There was no need to fetch any belongings or money, because she had none. In the end, she decided to simply wait in the store until everyone returned.

After a while, footsteps echoed in the passageway, and the door opened. She assumed it would be Charles or Leo, but the person who appeared in the doorway was far bigger than either of them.

"Wh-Who are you?" she called out nervously.

He was a burly man with red hair, and he looked older than Charles. The way his short hair stuck out from the back of his head reminded her of a bird's feathers for some reason. He was richly dressed: he wore a burgundy vest, pants, and boots, though his

muscular physique made him look more like a soldier or huntsman.

"Oh, right." His eyes widened. "It's your first time seeing me in this form. I forgot." He spoke in a friendly manner, as if he knew her. Then Lille realized she recognized that low voice, as well as the way he tilted his head to one side.

"Wait... Ark, is that you?" she guessed.

"Bullseye. How'd you know?" He ruffled the top of her head, which felt strange considering the fact that Lille was usually the one stroking *him*.

"How can you turn into a human?" she asked.

"Well, when you've been alive for as long as I have, you learn these things. I'm a magical bird, after all." He puffed out his chest.

"That's amazing," she replied. "But why stay in your bird form at all, then?"

"Because I'd get worn out otherwise. That's what it boils down to. I'd draw unwanted attention if I went around town as a bird, so I take human form whenever we go there. I try not to stay like this for long, though. Besides, even as a human, I'm not very good with my hands," he explained.

Lille hummed in assent, but then had an uncomfortable thought. "But, the bugs..."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"...No, never mind."

She shook her head. She had briefly imagined how unpleasant it would be if Ark were to eat bugs in this form, but perhaps that was something best left unsaid.

Ark wouldn't be able to fly them anywhere in human form. When she had glimpsed their surroundings from the sky the day before, the forest stretched as far as she could see. The town didn't appear to be too far away, either, but she wondered how they would get there without transport of some kind.

"Hey, I think Master Charlie and Leo are here now," Ark said.

She looked toward the door, and sure enough, the two of them had arrived on the threshold. Leo was dressed in a sweater vest and hunting cap, while Charles wore a vest layered under a tailcoat. His hair was pulled back in the same ponytail from earlier that morning, yet somehow he looked like a different person. It was the first time she had seen him in such formal clothing.

"What's wrong, Lille? Do I look weird?" he asked hesitantly, clumsily straightening the bolo tie around his neck with gloved

fingers.

“N-No, I was just thinking...in those clothes, you look more like a prince than a sorcerer,” she said shyly.

“A...prince? You’re far too kind. I’m flattered, though.” Charles blushed, scratching his cheek awkwardly. “To be honest, the robe I usually wear is much more comfortable, but I’d stand out in a crowd... Anyway, come to the door, everyone.”

They all gathered by the front door of the shop. It was made of sturdy wood, and the doorknob was fashioned in the shape of a bird’s head. Curved lines were sketched around the knob, enclosing it in a circle. Altogether, it resembled a sort of dial.

“So you see how the bird’s beak is pointing toward the forest symbol, right? We need to turn it to the town symbol instead,” Charles explained, reaching out for the knob. It made a *click-click-click* noise as he rotated the bird’s head. “All right, Lille. Now, try opening the door.”

“Huh? Me?” she squeaked. She had been watching from behind, but suddenly Charles was pulling her to the front.

“Try not to pass out from shock,” Leo snickered.

In all honesty, she was rather apprehensive. She peered up at Charles to see he was smiling at her kindly, his hand still firmly placed on the doorknob. In an instant, the insecurity building up in her chest dissipated, as if it had never existed at all. She wondered if Charles’s eyes were enchanted with magic, too. With newfound confidence, she pushed the door as hard as she could.

“...Here I go!” she announced.

As the door creaked open, a large street bustling with people and horse-drawn carriages appeared before her eyes. Lille was stunned; she stood stock-still and her mouth hung open in surprise. The other three shuffled forward, rousing her from her stupor as they stepped out onto the street. Out of curiosity, she whirled around to look behind her, and saw that the shop was still there—albeit squeezed into a narrow space between two other buildings.

“Are you surprised?” Charles said in her ear. “I thought it’d be easier to show you rather than explain it all, but...was that too much?” He sounded concerned and searched her eyes.

She shook her head vigorously.

“We use this same sort of gateway in a variety of cities in many different countries. Other people only see the door if they’re looking for magic items. That way, the shop will only appear in a

town if someone's searching for it. Pretty convenient, huh?" Charles explained proudly.

"Sure, it's convenient, but I don't see why you're so desperate to hide away in the forest," Ark said, shrugging.

"I'm not *hiding*," he huffed. "Crowds just aren't my cup of tea. Besides, you like being able to stay a bird, right?"

Charles had to strain his neck to talk up to Ark, Lille saw with a certain amusement.

"Yeah, I guess, but..." Ark trailed off.

"Lille," Charles said, "I need to do my own shopping, so Ark will take you to the tailor. I'll come find you when I'm done, so take as long as you like."

"What about Leo?" she asked, looking around for him. At some point he had disappeared.

"I expect Leo's gone to visit his parents' home," Charles replied.

In other words, this place was Leo's home country—the country where more than half of its citizens were sorcerers.

"All right. Ark, I'll leave her with you." Charles walked away briskly, his steps quickening as if he were trying to flee. Not a moment later, a crowd gathered around him and swallowed him whole.

Ark winced. "Yikes. He's gonna be stuck in that one for a while."

"Does he know them?" Lille blinked.

"Nope. It's because Master Charlie's a hero to the people here. Even if *he* doesn't know them, *they'll* definitely know *him*," he said.

"Leo said he stopped a war. Is that why?"

"Yup, that's it." He nodded. "In the past, Master Charlie worked in this country. I don't know whether he was born here, but this is effectively his hometown."

Hometown. Both Charles and Leo could easily visit the places they grew up in. Lille's hometown was so strikingly different, that a bitter, lonely feeling niggled in the pit of her stomach as she watched Charles exchanging words with the townspeople.

"Shall we get going? Oh, before that... Do you want anything to eat?" He urged her forward with a hand on her back, a playful grin on his face.



“ARK, is it really okay to buy so much?” Lille asked in disbelief.

In the ten minutes or so since arriving, her arms had vanished under a mountain of candy and sweets. The main street was lined with food stalls, and among them was a stand selling freshly baked goods. Ark had bought far more than she could ever eat—custard pies, lollipops, bottles of apple cider—but he kept piling them into her arms.

“Sure is. Master Charlie isn’t short of money, so munch away to your heart’s content.” He grinned.

“But won’t it come out of your salary?” She nibbled her lip.

“Lille,” he said seriously. “Do you really think I have any use for money? It buys me the best-quality meat, but that’s about it.”

Oh, that’s right, Ark’s a bird.

She had already adjusted to his human form, and her brain was getting all jumbled up.

He shrugged. “If you can’t eat it all today, you can just take it home. ...*Ah-ha!* The candy in this jar looks like it’ll keep for a long time. Here.” He placed another item on top of the increasingly growing stack.

“Ark!” she protested. “I already have more than enough.”

“Are you sure?” He looked hesitant. “Master Charlie told me to buy whatever you wanted. If you see anything good, just shout.”

“Master Charlie said that?”

He nodded. “Yup. He said you wouldn’t be able to sightsee in peace if he were around, so that’s why I’m the one in charge of you this trip.”

“He should’ve come with us. I don’t mind being interrupted.” She frowned.

“But *he* does,” Ark said. “There’s still a bit of a walk ahead of us, so why don’t you get started on that tasty-looking pie? I know it’s bad manners to walk while eating, but oh well—who cares?”

Ark kindly took over carrying the snacks so Lille could properly eat her warm custard pie. When she bit into it, thick cream oozed through the flaky crust, and a rich sweetness filled her mouth.

“Mmm...!” she hummed in delight.

“Tastes good, huh? Phew, I’m glad.”

With Ark at her side, she walked past all sorts of stands, marveling at the items for sale. An accessory stall caught her eye, but she politely refused when Ark offered to buy her something.

"Here's the place," Ark announced. She had finished both her custard pie and a lollipop by the time they came to a stop in front of a building whose sign read "The Three Needles, Tailor."

"We're regulars here, so don't be nervous. In we go," Ark said, opening the door. A bell jingled as they entered, and a smooth voice rang out clearly.

"Well, if it isn't Ark! It's been quite some time! Leo and Master Charlie aren't with you today?"

The source of the voice was a middle-aged woman with a kind face. She had a pear-shaped body and wore a navy-blue dress with an apron tied around her waist. Her black hair was gathered in a bun at the top of her head.

"Nope. Today, I'd like to order some clothes for this one here." Ark put a hand on Lille's shoulder.

"Oh my, what a sweet little girl!" the woman cooed. "... Something about her reminds me of Master Charlie. Ark, don't tell me she's..." A look of realization on her face, the woman clapped a hand over her mouth.

"No, no. She's not his daughter," Ark snickered. "She's his newest apprentice."

"Oh, really?" she replied. "You had me speechless for a moment there. Now that I think about it, he's probably not old enough to have a child her age."

"Ma'am, just so we're clear...Lille might look young, but she's sixteen."

"Sixteen...?" she repeated, gaping. But within seconds, she shook herself and smiled gently. "So, your name's Lille, is it? It must be difficult living in an all-male household. But don't you worry about finding fashionable clothes. I'll make you something lovely!"

The seamstress's eyes shone with care and concern, and made Lille feel warm inside. She nodded enthusiastically in reply, convinced that she could trust this woman.

"First, we'll take your measurements in that little room over there. Since he's a man, Ark will unfortunately have to wait out here," the seamstress said, gesturing.

"What's that supposed to mean? Technically, I'm not a man, I'm *male*." Ark pouted but sat down on the indicated sofa all the same.

Lille followed the seamstress to the fitting room.

“What sort of clothes would you like, Lille?” she asked, making conversation while she pulled a tape measure taut against Lille’s arms, hips, and shoulders.

Her movements were so quick that Lille began to doubt she was even reading the numbers. It was like magic—or maybe it really was magic. In a country where sorcerers were so commonplace, there was no way to tell who was one just by looking at them.

“Umm... I’d like something that’s easy to move in for when I do chores,” Lille suggested.

“In that case, a pinafore dress should work well for you. I’ll make a selection of dresses and aprons that you can mix and match as you like. You can choose from a variety of aprons—the usual type that you tie behind you with string, ones that are like short-sleeved dresses, or ones that hang from your hips... What do you think? Of course, I’ll design the dresses so you can wear them without the apron when you go out, too.”

“I think that sounds wonderful.” Lille smiled.

“Looking at your size, I think the sample dress will just about fit you. Wanna try it on?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

The seamstress disappeared for a moment, then came back with a bright-green, short-sleeved dress. There was a line of fabric-covered buttons across the neckline, and a large ribbon tied around the waist. The sleeves were ruffled, and all in all, it was a very charming garment.

“How lovely...” Lille said admiringly.

“The weather’s still a little chilly, so I recommend layering it over a blouse with a stand-up collar. Here’s one for you to try on.”

Once she finished changing, Lille noticed that the green of the dress complemented her hair and eyes perfectly. It almost matched her jade-green hair ribbon, too. However...

“I knew it’d suit you! It brings out the green in your eyes. Is green your favorite color?”

“Hmm... Pink used to be my favorite, a long time ago. But, now...,” she trailed off. Now, the color of Charles’s eyes was her favorite—the same color as the ribbon that made her heart feel strangely warm whenever she thought of it. “Green’s my favorite.”

“Oh, that’s lucky.” The seamstress smiled. “It’s a bit too loose around the bust and the hips, and the sleeves are a little big...but it

should fit you perfectly before long. Now, let's try this apron. It's just a spare one, mind you." She knotted a frilled waist apron at Lille's back. "Very cute. You're a delightful young lady, through and through!"

When Lille saw the reflection in the full-length mirror, she could hardly believe it was her own. Her appearance had gone through a major transformation since the day before, and the change was rather bewildering. She felt a sense of disconnect from how she looked. Of course, the clothes were lovely, and she liked them a lot. However, it seemed a shame to waste such beautiful clothes on someone like her.

"I don't suit these sorts of cloth—"

"You'll be fine." When she heard Lille's insecure whisper, the seamstress clapped her hands on Lille's shoulders firmly, as though in support. "You'll make a fine young woman—I guarantee it. Your eyes are full of promise. Your chest and hips will fill out, and you'll quickly start to grow taller. In half a year or so, the boys won't know what hit 'em."

"...Really?" Lille asked, cautiously.

"I've seen many girls grow up during my time; I can tell." She grinned. "Come to think of it, you'll probably grow out of that dress about the same time the colder weather sets in. Come visit me again, and I'll make you something new. I'm already looking forward to it. Hehe... I really do have a good head for business!" She wiggled playfully, and Lille couldn't help but giggle.

All of a sudden, Lille felt as if she could truly bare her heart to the seamstress. "Excuse me, but could I ask you something?" she wrung her hands shyly.

"Of course. What is it?" the seamstress replied.

"How can I become an adult faster?" she asked.

For a moment, the seamstress studied her face silently. "Do you want to be an adult?"

"Yes," Lille answered. "That way, I think I'll be able to help everyone better."

"Well..." The seamstress thought on it for a minute, and their eyes met in the reflection of the mirror. Eventually she smiled again, as if her expression had never faltered at all. "Personally, I think a girl becomes a woman when she falls in love."

Lille blinked. "Love?"

"That's right." She beamed. "To find someone who's very

special to you. You're already familiar with three men—do you have those sorts of feelings for any of them?"

Special...? Is that a different feeling than loving someone as family?

"Master Charlie..." Lille began, and the seamstress leaned forward excitedly, "...and Ark, and Leo...are all special to me."

"...Oh," the seamstress said, shoulders slumping in disappointment. "Well, I suppose that's a good thing." Lille felt a little sorry that her response didn't seem to be what the seamstress had hoped for. "You can keep those clothes, so feel free to wear them home. As for the others, you can come pick them up as soon as they're done. Our seamstresses are very skilled sorcerers, so we should have it all ready for you in about a week."

"Thank you," Lille said. "What about the clothes I wore here?"

"Oh, yes. Naturally, I'll wrap those up for you to take back home. I need to give you a proper bag for that huge pile of snacks, too!"

Lille breathed a sigh of relief that she wouldn't have to worry about the snacks falling from her hands anymore and turned to face the mirror. In the reflection, she happened to glimpse the seamstress stifling a huge yawn behind a hand. She wouldn't have noticed otherwise, but the angle of the mirror was such that she saw the motion quite clearly.

The seamstress rubbed her hand against her apron awkwardly. "Oh my—how rude of me. Sorry about that. It's just...lately, I've been having trouble getting to sleep. Then, when I *do* sleep, I have bad dreams. I suppose it's all part of getting old..." she sighed, rubbing at her temples.

Lille suddenly remembered her conversation with Charles. It was possible she was overstepping both his and the seamstress's bounds, but she had an overwhelming urge to return this woman's incredible kindness.

"Ma'am, I have a suggestion..."



LILLE waited for Ark outside while he settled the payment. She absent-mindedly watched the world go by, the large sack of sweets resting at her feet.

She noticed that everyone happily sauntering down the street wore beautiful clothing. Other girls her age passed by, but unlike Lille, they looked like mature young women, some of them even wearing makeup. Until recently, she had been completely isolated, meaning the only face she knew was her own. Even when she had arrived at Charles's house, her only point of reference was men, so her appearance hadn't bothered her. But as she watched regular girls going about their lives, she couldn't help but feel pathetic in comparison.

Although she was exactly the same height she had been that morning, she felt as though she had suddenly halved in size, and was shrinking more by the second. Her palms, her chest, her personality... Everything about her seemed far too small.

A flash of golden hair out of the corner of her eye abruptly distracted her from her thoughts.

"Master Charlie?" she mumbled curiously.

Despite Ark's instruction to stay put, she was unable to stop her legs from giving chase, leaving her bag behind. She found herself in an alley that branched off from the main street, Charles nowhere to be seen. She must have imagined it; there wasn't anyone there, much less him. All that stood before her was an empty, gloomy street, not a single soul in sight. She had lived by herself for years and years without a second thought, but in that moment, for some reason, loneliness overwhelmed her.

"Master Charlie..." she whimpered.

Why did she feel like crying all of a sudden? She had never felt so unbearably sad, even in the tower. And ever since Charles had taken her in, her heart had barely a moment's rest from happiness and excitement. So why were tears welling up in her eyes? She was acting like a lost child. Loneliness had never affected her like this before; she didn't understand what was happening.

As she stood rooted to the spot, her head low, a sudden force struck her from behind, making a dull *thwack*. She stumbled, and only just managed to prevent herself from tumbling to the ground.

"Ugh, would ya believe that? Ya made me spill my drink! Now do somethin' about it!" an irritated, threatening voice yelled down at her.

When she looked up, she saw two young men. They must have bumped into her. Judging by their reddened cheeks, they had been drinking all afternoon. They reeked of alcohol, and even Lille could

tell they were considerably drunk.

"I'm...I'm sorry," she stuttered. A heated, hostile energy surrounded them, and she instinctively backed away.

"Huh? What're ya runnin' for?"

"We're the victims here, y'know! It isn't nice to act like you're scared."

"But..." she squeaked. *But I can sense a dark aura from you, and it is scary.* They didn't seem like they would leave her alone if she said that out loud, though.

"Wait a sec. If ya look closely, she's actually pretty cute," one of the men sneered, leaning in to stare at her face.

"Ha! I never knew you were into little girls."

"Nah, I mean...you can see she's got some fancy clothes on. If we're lucky, she might be some sorta noble."

"Ooh, good point. How 'bout we tie her up, then make her parents pay us to let her go?"

"Heh, you're a genius."

Lille's face paled. "D-Don't!" she cried. She didn't want to cause trouble for Charles. And the two men were well-dressed; most likely they were from respectable families that would be distressed by their involvement in a crime as major as kidnapping. "I really am sorry for bumping into you...but I wouldn't recommend doing anything so reckless. People would think you're evil."

"Wha—?!" Their faces turned even redder, not from alcohol, but anger.

"This cheeky little brat isn't worth listenin' to!" one spat, saliva flying from his mouth. Lille watched his pupils narrow, as if he were a ferocious, predatory animal mid-hunt.

Just as she thought they were about to grab her, a tremendous crack resounded through the air. A glowing wall stretched out in front of her, sending them flying backward.

"Damn it, that hurts..." one complained.

"That brat did something," the other groaned. Their bodies had slammed into the alley wall, and they were painfully struggling to right themselves. Lille looked down at them, dumbfounded. She had no idea what just happened but decided to save thinking for later. For now, she needed to move.

"Ack! She's getting away!"

"Don't you dare!"

Her feet tangled underneath her, but she willed them forward.

It was only a few yards back to the main street, but the distance seemed vast. Just a little farther, and she would be out of the alley. But as soon as she felt the sunlight on her skin again, and heard the clamor of the crowd, she ran straight into somebody else.

“Whoa!”

“I’m sorry!” she yelped. Although she had barreled into the person at full speed, the impact wasn’t nearly as powerful as her earlier collision, and the person didn’t budge an inch. Instead, he hugged her tight, safely bringing her to a stop.

“Lille? What were you doing down there?”

“Oh, Ark!” she breathed, relief clear in her voice. He had the same familiar smell and sturdy physique as he did in bird form, and she clung to him desperately, trying to calm herself down.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’re about to cry... *Hm?*” His tone turned suspicious when he looked up to see the two men emerging from the alley, staggering. “...What did you do to our precious young lady?”

A flame flickered deep within Ark’s eyes. His voice was composed, but Lille saw that his red hair was standing on end. Despite his human form, she could sense the presence of a colossal, wicked bird with the power to hunt the fiercest of carnivores. His red-hot anger seemed to ignite the air, making it shimmer in a haze of heat. For the first time, Lille felt like she was witnessing Ark’s true nature.

“Eek!”

“Th-This guy’s not normal!”

As though struck by an invisible force, the two men suddenly scurried away, not daring to look back.



"Thank you, Ark," Lille said. She moved to look up at him, but his booming voice swiftly interrupted her.

"You silly girl!" he yelled. "I *told* you not to move! When there are so many people out, some of them are bound to be bad guys. What if something had happened to you?!"

"I'm sorry..."

Although he chastised her severely, her sheer relief at being reunited with Ark won out over any negative feelings. It reminded her of a time when, after she'd gotten lost as a little girl, her father had found her safe and sound.

"I'm just glad you're okay," he sighed. "It looks like the protection charm Master Charlie cast on you worked."

"Huh? A charm?"

"Yup. Right here." Ark stepped into the shadow of the alleyway and bent down to pick up something. It was the jade-green ribbon that had been tied around the end of her braid. She hadn't realized until then that it had come undone at some point.

"Yesterday's magic...?"

The ribbon was scorched around the edges and falling to pieces. She remembered how Charles had enchanted the bow with some sort of magic after Leo finished braiding her hair.

"To think it'd come in handy so quickly..." Ark furrowed his eyebrows. "When Master Charlie comes back, let's keep this to ourselves. He's a worrier," he said, putting a hand to his neck and twisting it with a *crack*.

"Ark, could I possibly have that ribbon back?" she asked.

"Sure...but you know you can't use it anymore, right?"

"Yes, I realize that." Lille nodded, reaching out for the tattered piece of fabric. It was a reminder of how Charles had protected her. She placed it neatly in the palm of her hand, holding it gently. She could've sworn it was still warm.



THEY tried to stay quiet about the ordeal, but there was no hiding Lille's unraveled braid from Charles, and they found themselves on the receiving end of a serious lecture when they returned to the house. Lille almost cried when she saw how deathly white Charles's face turned in response to their summary of what had happened.

She was so, so grateful to have a family that worried for her, and even scolded her, if necessary. She vowed to herself that she would never do anything so dangerous ever again.



ONE week later, Charles went to pick up Lille's new clothes from The Three Needles. Lille was to stay behind to reflect on her actions, so she had to ask Charles to deliver the seamstress's magic items. She helped Charles prepare some Sleepy Tea and a batch of Sweet Dreams Potpourri, working together to improve the formulas, which made them the first products designed in part by Lille. They were proof that she could still be of help to someone, despite how small she was. She was looking forward to discovering more and more ways she could contribute.

When Lille told Charles about the seamstress ordering some items from his shop, his entire face had lit up.

"I can't believe you found us a new customer already. That's amazing. Now you can get started on your first job." He beamed.

To celebrate the occasion, Charles gifted Lille one of the potpourri bags. It had a sweet, calming aroma. Later, Lille opened up the bag, and placed the tattered ribbon inside before tying it up again. It was her first ever secret.

Whenever she went to bed with the bag placed next to her pillow, she had a mysterious notion that she would meet Charles in her dreams. After a few days, she started a nightly routine of offering a prayer up to the stars:

I pray that all the people I love will have wonderful dreams tonight.

Chapter 4: Master Charlie's Magic Lessons

ONE month had passed since Lille first moved in. Spring was coming to an end, and the floral breeze mingled with the rich scent of fresh, green leaves. The vegetables growing in the garden were spreading out their roots, looking forward to the promise of early summer.

In addition to the plants and seasons, Lille was changing as well. Her height had increased, and her previously bony figure was protected by soft curves. Gradually, the clothes she had ordered from The Three Needles hugged the shape of her body instead of hanging loosely around her chest and hips. It was strange to see the seamstress's prediction come true. Every time she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror, she was surprised and delighted to see herself slowly becoming an adult.

Her body wasn't the only thing that had grown; her duties around the house also expanded. Thanks to Leo's intense training, her culinary repertoire had broadened, and she could do the cleaning and laundry without issue. And after a lot of practice, she could braid her hair without help.

In the afternoons, she and Charles brainstormed new ideas for magic items or reworked the shop's layout. More often than not, Lille was also the one who dealt with customers. Business was looking up: almost every day at least one customer showed up at the front door of Charles's Magic Item Shop. With such good fortune, the house became a lively, busy place.

One day, Charles came to Lille with a suggestion.

"I think it's about time you start your magical studies, Lille," he said.

Despite her improvements in so many other areas, she had yet to learn a single piece of magic. Each day was full of housework and shop-keeping duties, and in her free time she endeavored to read as many of the books in the study as she could. Her literacy was still only that of a child's, but she desperately wanted to be able to read difficult books one day.

She had become so used to her new way of life that she had almost given up on learning magic. Perhaps, however, Charles had simply been waiting for her body and soul to become robust enough to wield it.

Charles led her out into the garden, and they walked to a clear stretch of ground. She thought she was used to the sight of Charles's back, but for some reason, it looked especially large and imposing that day.

"Lille, are you sure about this? I thought that perhaps you'd want to forget about magic. I mean...your memories about it aren't exactly pleasant," Charles said, an apologetic tilt to his eyebrows.

"No, it's quite all right. I really do want to learn how to use it," Lille assured him. If she worked on her abilities, she would be better equipped to help with the shop...and able to help Charles more.

"If you're certain." He smiled, relieved. "First of all, I think we should get an idea of your current powers. Because you don't know how to use them, there's a possibility you could lose control, so stay alert." His expression was gentle, as always, but his manner of speaking was clearly that of a teacher's. "What do you think magic is, Lille? Why do you think sorcerers exist?"

"...In my home country, we were taught that anyone who could use magic had formed a pact with a demon before they were born," she said hesitantly. She had avoided the subject thus far to avoid offending Leo. But she felt she could tell Charles, and that he would listen. The burden of her past was becoming too heavy to shoulder alone.

Charles's expression didn't shift. He just looked at her with eyes as calm as ever.

"I see," he said. "Do you believe that, Lille? Do you think you made a pact with a demon?"

"No, Master Charlie," she replied immediately.

"I don't think so, either," he agreed. "I certainly don't remember ever doing such a thing. Besides, what's the point of believing that if they have no proof? It doesn't matter how many people claim otherwise—believe what you know to be true."

She nodded. "I will."

"Human beings are flawed, after all," he murmured, almost as if he were talking to himself. His eyes became unfocused for a moment, staring into the distance. "Please, never forget that your

heart is what guides you,” he said, holding a hand to his chest.

Lille copied him, placing her hand on her own chest. She could feel her heart beating. Her heart was what told her that she loved those dear to her. It told her that helping people made her happy. Lille wholeheartedly believed that so long as she never forgot those two truths, she would never go astray.

“If demons and gods have nothing to do with magic, why was I born a sorcerer?” she questioned.

“That’s something I cannot tell you.” He shook his head. “It’s entirely possible that there’s no reason at all behind who can and who can’t use magic. However...I believe that if you’re born with the power, you have a duty to make the most of it.”

“Is that why you opened the shop?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I thought it was important to bring magic to people who really need it, rather than give it to the government or military,” he said.

Lille was happy to hear that Charles thought similarly to her; she wanted to help people in need, too. In fact, perhaps her duty as a sorcerer was to help Charles’s dreams come true. She liked the sound of that very much.

“I might not be able to answer all your questions, but I *can* teach you everything I know about magic.” Charles smiled. “Do you know anything about mana?”

“Mana?” She tilted her head to one side. She had never heard the word before, not in her home country nor in any of the books she read.

“Mana functions as the source of magic. It exists anywhere and everywhere you could think of. For us sorcerers, it’s sort of like air,” he said, taking a deep breath.

“Like air? How?”

“It runs through pretty much everything—nature, plants, animals, humans... However, some people are born with an excess of mana, and they can use it to absorb the mana around them and convert it into magic. We call those people sorcerers,” Charles explained. To prove his point, he waved a hand, and a sudden gust of wind blew past them, making Lille’s braid sway.

“Is it possible to be born with a lot of mana but never become a sorcerer?” she asked anxiously.

Even if she had been born with an excess of mana, she would never become a real sorcerer if she couldn’t convert it into magic.

She feared she might fail to use her magic no matter how hard she practiced.

“It’s extremely rare, but it is possible,” Charles mused. “Just like you, there have been other people who’re born with magic but don’t know how to use it. Some of them live their whole lives never learning. However, people can also become sorcerers in reverse. You can’t change how much mana you’re born with, but you *can* study how to use it. That means there are some sorcerers who can use magic despite not having much internal mana. Think of it this way—magical powers are something you’re born with, but sorcery is a matter of hard work.”

Lille was suddenly reminded of a friend from her childhood. He had lived in her neighborhood, and often liked to challenge Lille to races. She lacked coordination, though, so she ended up losing every time. Eventually, she got fed up with losing and decided to practice running every day. As a result, she finally won against him. The process of learning magic sounded like a similar concept.

“Your internal mana is like water in a bottle,” Charles continued. “The size of the bottle varies from person to person, but if you keep using it and fill the bottle with more than it can hold, your body will suffer the consequences. On the other hand, if you cork the bottle too tightly, the glass will crack and the water will seep out. For example...did you feel any different immediately after you left the tower?”

Once he mentioned it, Lille recalled that her body had felt extremely light the moment they flew through the window. She had assumed it was adrenaline from fleeing the tower, but perhaps it was related to her magic.

She described the sensation, and Charles nodded pensively.

“That must have been because you escaped the magic barrier. Also, I think you only started growing once you arrived here, for the same reason—the barrier wasn’t holding you back anymore. Before, it was stopping any mana from entering your body, as well as forcing your internal mana to stay put. The mana inside you quickly became inactive,” he said, frowning.

It was true that Lille’s growth spurt was a little too extreme to have been caused simply by eating well. Compared to a month earlier, she could reach higher shelves on the bookcases. Her eye level was now about the same as Leo’s, whereas before she had to peer up at him.

She looked down at her perfectly fitted sleeves and remembered how they used to hang loose on her arms. Before arriving here, she had been like a plant with its roots crammed into a tiny pot. But now there was nothing in her way. Now, when she took a deep breath, her lungs expanded and filled with as much air as she could muster. Now, she could sleep with all her limbs splayed out.

Charles had said it was because she escaped the magic barrier, but Lille thought there was more to it. Since coming to Charles's house, her suffocating loneliness had disappeared. If not for him, she doubted she would have been able to breathe so easy.

"Master Charlie, is it possible to see mana? Or feel it?" she asked.

Apparently, like air, it had always been around her, influencing her mind and body without her knowledge. She couldn't quite get her head around it.

Charles put a hand to his chin in thought, then pointed toward the sea of trees beyond. "Let's take a look around the forest," he suggested.

Lille followed him past the tree line, staying close behind. Abruptly, her field of vision dimmed, and her eyes had to adjust to the shade. The sun glittered through the gaps in the trees, casting soft smatterings of light across the earth, as if reflecting off the surface of crisp, clear water.

"How beautiful..." she marveled.

"The concentration of mana is very high in this forest," Charles said. "Try closing your eyes and taking a big, deep breath. Keep holding it, then focus on every part of your body, all the way to the tips of your toes."

Following Charles's instruction, she inhaled slowly, concentrating hard. All of a sudden, a gold color flecked with green shone behind her eyelids. She jumped, faltering for a moment, but then a warm hand entwined with her own.

"It's all right," Charles reassured her. "Now, hold onto that feeling, and open your eyes."

Slowly, she peeked through her eyelashes to see little spheres of light floating throughout the air. They radiated a warm, gold light.



“Oh my...” she exclaimed. She had never seen something so beautiful. When she stretched out a hand to touch one, it dissipated against her skin like a bubble. She wandered around in utter amazement, paying no attention to where she was going. Suddenly, her foot caught under a tree root.

“Lille, watch out!”

She gasped, squeezing her eyes shut just as she was about to hit the ground. But the bruising impact she expected never came; instead, Charles caught her.

“Are you okay...?” he asked, worried.

Lille found herself pressed snugly against his broad chest supported by surprisingly strong arms. She could feel his long, silky hair brushing the nape of her neck. She had been in a similar position with Ark, once. Then, she had felt nothing out of the ordinary. But with Charles, her face felt like it was on fire.

“Thank the gods I caught you in time. Did you twist your ankle or anything?”

“N-No. I’m fine,” she replied.

When Charles moved to release her, she almost refused to let go. Then she saw it. A warmth spread out from where they were touching, and she saw a light glow from within him. It was an intense, jade-green light, both brighter than the sun, and softer than the moon. It had to be Charles’s mana.

“Lille? What’s wrong?”

She instinctively reached toward it, but was interrupted by a sudden wave of dizziness. Drowsiness rapidly overwhelmed her.

“M-Master...” she called weakly. By the time Charles realized what was happening, it was too late. Strength sapped from each of her limbs, one by one, as if she were a puppet whose strings were being cut.

“Lille!”

She collapsed into his arms, and immediately lost consciousness.



“A developmental fever?” Leo’s eyebrows shot up in disbelief. “From absorbing too much mana?”

Charles had carried Lille to her bedroom, and when Leo

brought her some rice pudding, Charles told him what happened. Apparently, Leo had his doubts.

“*Shhh*,” Charles hushed him. “Please keep it down, for Lille’s sake. The fever made her lightheaded.”

“But...that just isn’t a thing. If it was, it’d happen to kids way more often. Are you *sure* you have a brain in there?” Leo eyed him dubiously.

“It’s partly my fault for not being careful enough. If I’d controlled my mana properly, this wouldn’t have happened,” Charles said calmly, although he was frowning.

Leo’s scowl didn’t budge an inch. “The fact that it happened because of your mana just annoys me more!” he huffed.

“Well, I get the impression that Lille’s easily influenced by other people’s mana, considering how sincere and genuine she is,” Charles said.

“...From now on, I’ll come to class with her,” Leo insisted.

“I won’t have to make time for you separately that way, so that sounds good to me. But...won’t you get bored?”

“Maybe, but I don’t care.” Leo pouted before angrily shoving the bowl of pudding onto the table and stomping out of the room, slamming the door violently behind him.

“Honestly, that boy...” Charles sighed. “Lille, here’s some rice pudding and some orange juice. Can you manage a little?”

“...Yes,” she replied. Charles propped a pillow behind her back and helped her sit up.

“Are you feeling well enough to hold the spoon?” he asked. She made a valiant attempt, managing to scoop up some of the pudding, but the spoon soon slipped from her fingers and clattered back into the bowl. Charles picked it up again. “...I thought not. Come on—open wide.”

As if she were a baby bird, she opened her mouth, and Charles slid the spoon between her lips. The mellow sweetness of the rice pudding washed over her tongue, and she swallowed it gratefully. Somehow, she finished the bowl, and afterward, Charles supported her back while she drank the orange juice. With a full stomach, she felt a lot better.

As she lay down again, she was reminded of a similar scene from her childhood. Ever since Charles had given her the bag of potpourri, she had all sorts of dreams every night, and had probably recovered most of her memories from the first six years of her life.

“...When I was little, my mother used to feed me like this whenever I got a fever,” she said absently.

Charles used magic to cool down a wet towel, and carefully placed it on her forehead. “Speaking of your mother, I remember you said I was like her in some ways. I might not be able to replace her, but I’m glad you feel comfortable around me.” He smiled.

“Master Charlie...” she began.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry for being such a nuisance.”

“Lille...” he said despondently. She was the one who wanted to cry, and yet Charles looked just as sad. “I don’t think you’re a nuisance. You’re part of my— You’re part of *our* precious family. Of course we’re going to be worried when you’re sick, and relieved when you’re healthy. That doesn’t make you a nuisance. Family means we’ll always be there for each other, don’t you think?”

She blinked. “I never knew you thought of me as part of your family, too.”

“Of course I do. Ark and Leo feel the same way, I’m sure. Leo would never say it out loud, though,” he laughed.

Gradually, her sight blurred with tears. Knowing that those special to her loved her just as much in return filled her with an incredible joy.

“Thank you, Master Charlie,” she said tearily. “Could you give Leo my thanks for the rice pudding? Oh, and tell Ark I’m ever so sorry for worrying him.”

“Got it.” He smiled. “Now, you get some sleep. Goodnight, Lille. Sleep well.”

After he left, Lille couldn’t help but replay in her mind what had happened in the forest. She knew she should rest, but as she thought about it, her face grew hotter and hotter, and she just couldn’t fall sleep. In a way, she was glad to be alone, yet also desperately wished someone else were with her. For the first time since leaving the tower, she went to sleep feeling lonely.



THE following day, they made Lille stay in bed, just to be safe, so the next time she was well enough to attend magic lessons was two days later.

“Hello, Master Charlie. Hello, Leo,” she said, greeting them both with a nod. “I’m looking forward to learning something new today.”

Leo scrunched up his nose and gave her a disdainful look. “Don’t hold me back too much, okay?”

“...I’ll do my best,” she promised him.

“Don’t worry about that, you two. I’ve planned a different activity for each of you,” Charles assured them. “Leo, you’ll be practicing how to cast the magic circle I taught you last time.”

“Yes, Master Charlie.”

Leo distanced himself from the rest of the group and consulted a grimoire while beginning to chant some sort of incantation. Eventually, a dim circle of light emerged on the ground at his feet. Lille had seen a magic circle once before: she and Ark flew through one to teleport to Charles’s house. That one had been floating in the sky, but the circle Leo cast shone against the earth. She wondered what it did.

“You’ll be putting some simple magic into practice today as well, Lille,” Charles said. “It’s probably best if we start with something you have a natural talent for. Tell me—has anything strange ever happened to you when you concentrated really hard?”

“Oh...yes,” she replied, thinking back to how she used to listen to the townspeople’s conversations when she was trapped in the tower. She always thought it odd that she could hear things from so far away, and even back then, she wondered if her magic was responsible. She told Charles all she could remember.

“I see,” he hummed. “That must’ve been why you didn’t lose your capacity to feel emotions. Your magic seeped through the cracks of the barrier. It saved you, Lille.”

Really? She was surprised to learn that her beloved hobby was what had kept her from completely wasting away.

“Also...” she continued, “ever since I came here, I’ve been able to sense people’s emotions. Through their aura, their temperature... Is that normal for a sorcerer?”

“Without concentrating?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

Charles fell silent for a moment, his eyes serious.

“I’ve never heard of such magic before. There are ways to read emotions by touching someone, but not in the way you described...” he said, gazing at her. “This could be a huge

discovery,” he murmured.

“Really?” She blinked.

“Indeed.” He nodded. “A sorcerer’s natural talent is usually what best represents their personality. For example—someone with aggressive tendencies might have strong offensive magic, or someone who wishes to protect others might have strong defensive magic. Most likely, you developed that ability because of how much you wanted to get to know people and share their experiences. It suits you well.”

“It suits me, huh...?” she said, thinking once again about those ten years she spent all alone in the tower.

She had always looked forward to listening to the townspeople; they seemed happy, and she delighted in that human connection, even if she couldn’t be directly involved. She longed to know more, hear more, experience more of their lives and relationships. If a sorcerer’s personality manifested in their magic, it was no wonder that Lille’s yearning had connected her with the nearest settlement, despite the distance.

Even when Lille hadn’t known the first thing about magic, it had always been with her, protecting her. It responded to the calls of her heart and made her desires reality.

“I really wish I could thank my own mana.” She smiled bashfully.

“I bet you do,” Charles replied. “But I think it already knows how grateful you are.”

She gently placed a hand on her chest. She didn’t know where in her body her mana resided, but, as Charles said, she felt as though she truly could convey her thanks.

“Now that we have an idea of where your talents lie, let’s work on strengthening them,” he suggested. “With practice, you might soon be able to read people’s thoughts, or sense lingering memories from places and objects.”

“But...,” she trailed off. If that happened, Lille would discover what Charles was hiding from her—regardless of whether he wanted to tell her or not. She wasn’t sure being able to read people’s minds would be a good thing.

Recently, her own emotions were becoming harder and harder to identify, like when Charles had saved her from falling. However, she *did* know that she didn’t want anyone else to know about how she had felt in that moment. It was a precious, private memory she

wanted to lock up inside her heart forever. If she had those sorts of thoughts, surely other people did, too, and she wished to respect that.

"I have to admit, I'm a little scared of knowing everything other people are thinking. What if they don't want me to know? I'd feel extremely guilty," she confessed sadly.

"Ah... You're right. Sorry—that was a thoughtless thing to suggest. In that case, perhaps we should let your talent develop naturally. That way, it'll adapt to your wishes rather than follow any specific training. It won't grow any stronger than you'd like it to, so don't worry about being unable to control it," he added.

"Okay," she said, nodding. Judging by Charles's reaction, her magic was extremely rare. Doubtless, it would be far more useful to him if she trained it properly, but he had chosen to honor her feelings nonetheless.

"Now, let's start with the basics of sorcery," Charles said, his tone turning academic once more. "That includes magic you can use in daily life, such as creating fire or moving things without touching them."

"That *does* sound useful for cooking and cleaning," Lille remarked.

"Right?" Charles grinned. "This is the sort of elementary stuff people learn when they start magic school. Oh—I'll go fetch you a textbook that might help."

"I'll come with you."

They told Leo where they were going, then made their way to the study.

It was a small room crammed full of bookcases with barely enough space for two people to stand. Some weeks previously, Charles had said she could use it whenever she liked, so she had started to borrow books regularly. She read textbooks to help improve her reading and writing, or flipped through cookbooks for new recipes.

"Now, where was it? Hmm... I could've sworn it was this shelf..." Charles mumbled to himself.

"Master Charlie," Lille called up to him as he searched the shelves. She leaned her weight against the study door to prevent it from closing.

"Hm?" he replied distractedly.

“What magical talents do you and Leo have?” she asked.

“Oh, right—I didn’t tell you. Mine is...being able to control the natural world, I suppose. Remember how you saw me manipulate the wind earlier? I can make it rain, too. Otherwise, I can control water, fire, and plants. That’s why I like working in the garden so much,” he explained. “...A-ha, here it is!”

Given how at peace he seemed living in the forest compared to his awkwardness when visiting the city, Lille thought his power suited him perfectly.

“What about Leo?” she prompted.

Charles froze, his outstretched arm reaching for a high shelf.

“Leo’s... He’s a healer,” he answered after a moment.

“A healer? So he can treat people and animals if they get injured or sick?”

“That’s right.”

“That sounds like a really useful ability. He could help so many people,” she said, her eyes filled with admiration.

“...Yeah,” Charles replied. Strangely, he didn’t say anything else. He simply grabbed a few books and walked back over to where Lille held the door open.

“Master Charlie...?” She glanced at him, concerned.

“I found the textbooks you’ll need,” he announced, changing the subject. “I picked out several that go over the basics, so just put the ones we won’t use today in your room.”

“Yes, Master Charlie.”

He deposited the thick books into her arms one by one.

“All right. I’m going to go check on how Leo’s doing, so I’ll meet you back outside.”

He was gone before Lille could say a word.

She trundled to her bedroom and dropped the heavy books onto her writing desk. She selected one to bring to class, then sandwiched some parchment and a quill between its pages. While she prepared her things, she contemplated how Charles had acted before he left. Although his expression had been otherwise impassive, his eyes had been slightly stern. When he averted his gaze, it had felt as though he were begging her not to question him further.

“Healing magic...” she repeated under her breath. She thought it was a magnificent ability. Was there a reason why Charles couldn’t say the same?

There was doubt deep within Charles's heart. It had been such a minute shift in his aura that Lille wouldn't have been able to tell without the help of her magic. She regretted being able to tell at all, and the fact that she had triggered that reaction made her feel even worse.

Magic or no, sensing others' emotions wasn't always an enjoyable experience. Still, she longed for the power to watch over both her own heart and the hearts of those she loved. Was that so selfish?

"The human heart is complicated..." she sighed, beginning for the first time to understand the truth of such a statement.

That same day, a frog appeared in the middle of Leo's magic circle, ribbiting happily.



BY the next day, Lille had mostly gotten her head around the basics of levitating objects.

"Good job! Now that you're able to levitate small branches, let's try moving one in mid-air," Charles encouraged. Leo was working alongside her, though he was levitating a much heavier branch, without breaking a sweat.

"Thank you for giving me an example to follow, Leo." She smiled in admiration.

"I'm not giving you an example," he said irritably. "I'm showing you how much better I am." Even in the face of his rudeness, the sparkle in Lille's eyes didn't waver.

"Wow, you can even lift multiple branches at once!" she observed. "I wonder if I can get that good at it..."

"Sure, if you work hard enough." He puffed his chest out.

"I will. Thank you, Leo," she said genuinely.

In spite of his peevish tone and snappy complaints, Leo was accompanying Lille during her lessons of his own volition. It had to be boring for him, yet he showed up all the same. Recently, Lille had started to think that he was actually a rather caring boy. Considering he said he had a little sister, perhaps it was to be expected.

"Master Charlie? I can't get it to move." She frowned. After a lot of intense concentration and silent screaming at the branch, she

had somehow managed to make it float. Making it move was another matter altogether. It wouldn't budge an inch.

"You're tensing up too much. You need to relax your muscles, calm down, and let the mana flow through you. Then, imagine the mana gliding in the direction you're trying to move the branch," Charles instructed.

"Yes, Master Charlie."

"Remember: to cast a spell is to give mana direction."

"I'll do my best," she resolved. The sun was shining almost directly overhead. In the afternoon, Leo would have another, more in-depth lesson with Charles, and Lille would tend the shop. She wanted to succeed in some way at her current task, but she only had until noon.

She closed her eyes, slowly inhaling and exhaling. The air was rich with the aroma of approaching summertime, and when she filled her lungs with it, the fresh, green air calmed her down.

I can do this.

She imagined the floating branch sliding across a sheet of ice, then willed the surrounding mana to aid her in pushing it along. Once the image crystalized in her mind, she thrust both her hands out toward the branch.

All of a sudden, it took off at a tremendous speed, whizzing through the air.

"I...I did it!" she exclaimed. Unfortunately, her success took her by such surprise that she completely forgot she was supposed to be controlling the branch.

"That's great, Lille! Good job," Charles praised her, his whole face lighting up in a huge smile. Meanwhile, Lille stood stiffly rooted to the spot, her hands still sticking out awkwardly.

"Lille? You can stop now," he added after a moment.

"It won't... It won't stop!" she said, panicking. Before Charles had a chance to intercept it, the branch was flying toward her at full force. It crashed into her legs, grazing her skin painfully.

"Eek!" she cried.

"Lille! Are you okay?!"

It knocked her off balance, and she toppled onto her backside. The offending branch lay contritely on the ground next to her, almost as if it were ashamed of its actions.

"Owww..." she groaned, pulling up the hem of her skirt to see blood oozing from a cut across her knee.

Leo grimaced. "Yeesh, that looks nasty. You're bleeding."

"As a girl, I guess you'll want to avoid any big scars. Healing magic isn't my strong suit, but I'll give it a go..." Charles said, crouching down and moving to place his hands on her leg. Surprisingly, Leo held him back.

"It's fine, Master Charlie. I'll do it," he announced.

"Huh?" Charles blinked. "But, Leo, you..."

"I'll be fine. Please. I don't want her to lose any more blood," he insisted impatiently.

"...All right," Charles conceded.

Leo took Charles's place, kneeling in front of Lille. She assumed he'd try to cheer her up by talking her ear off, like usual, but something was wrong. Without a single word, he bit his lip nervously before touching her knee.

A dim light enveloped the gash, shining like moonlight. Her leg steadily grew hotter, as if he were pouring warm water over it. Though she didn't like the sight of blood, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the cut. The wound was closing up, and the inflammation around it was going down, too. In the end, her blood-stained skin was the only evidence she had been injured at all.

"...How does it feel? Still hurt?" he finally said.

"Oh, no. Not anymore."

"Okay. That's good," he replied curtly. When he stood up, his eyes remained focused on her leg. He didn't look up at her face once. "The wound's mostly closed up, but you could still get infected with tetanus or something. I'll go get the first aid kit, just in case."

"Th-Thank you," Lille stuttered.

She got to her feet, brushing the dirt off her behind as she watched Leo run to the house. Despite how perfectly he'd healed her, he didn't seem pleased at all. His face had been plastered with a pained frown, as if he were the one injured. And when he first touched her, Lille had seen the emotions etched into his face—
anxiety, unrest, and fear.

"...But, why?" she murmured to herself. Charles was standing beside her, and she looked up to see him gazing after Leo as well.

Charles said that healing was Leo's talent. If magical talent was closely linked to a sorcerer's personality, it probably meant that Leo had a profound wish to heal someone or save someone—just like how Lille craving connection with other people influenced her own

magic.

“Master Charlie? When he said that I could still get tetanus, does that mean...?”

“...Yes. Magical healing isn’t all-powerful,” he said solemnly. “It can speed up the recovery of injuries and mask pain, but it can’t prevent sickness or prolong anyone’s lifespan...” He paused for a moment. “No—it’s not that it *can’t*, but you *shouldn’t*.”

His words hung heavy in the air. The way he said it, for a sorcerer to attempt such a thing was strictly taboo.

“Why not?” she asked nervously.

“...Because if you did, you wouldn’t be human anymore.”

And with that he fell silent.



“**SAY**, Ark. Have you known Leo for long?” Lille asked, staring up at the ceiling from her bed.

Occasionally, if he felt like it, Ark came to sleep in her room at night. When he did, he swooped through the door and alighted on one of her bedposts. Talking with Ark was always a lot of fun, and they often found themselves deep in conversation. Sometimes they spoke until they fell asleep.

“Nah, not really. He’s only been here for about a year,” he yawned, refolding his wings and settling in.

“Oh. Then, did you bring him here the same way you brought me?” she asked.

“Nope. To be honest, I don’t know much about Leo either. Master Charlie just brought him home one day, out of the blue, saying he was going to be his new apprentice.”

“How curious...”

“Where he’s from, a kid his age should’ve been in magic school. So I just assumed Master Charlie took him in ‘cause there was some reason he didn’t want to go to school,” Ark said. “I mean, back then, he was even more antisocial, and he didn’t seem like the type to do well in a group environment. His circumstances didn’t really matter to me, though, so I never actually asked.”

“Magic school, huh...?” she said wistfully.

Leafing through the textbooks Charles had lent her, she had noticed both his and the academy’s names written inside the front

cover. Lille had been imprisoned before she was old enough to attend school, so she'd never even been to a normal one, never mind one that taught magic.

"Well, that's how it is when half the population is sorcerers. They've got a pretty huge school there," Ark commented. "Do you wanna see what it's like to go to school, too?"

"Only a little." She smiled. "I'm sure I'd prefer studying here with Master Charlie."

"Yup, probably," he said, sounding pleased with her answer. He closed his eyes peacefully.

"...Ark, are you asleep?" She watched him for a while, but he didn't even twitch. Eventually, she gave up and nestled on her side.

Before she shut her eyes, she recalled Leo's emotions from earlier that day, when he had touched her. She had never encountered fear or anxiety on that wavelength before. It was an entirely different sort of fear than what she'd felt when the two men chased her in the city. Leo's fear had been tinged with sadness, like a medicine so bitter the taste could make one cry.

"My chest feels like it's caving in..." she whispered.

Was Leo feeling the same way? Even if he were, Lille suspected he wouldn't appreciate someone sleeping next to him or holding his hand. However, she could at least wake up early the next morning to make him his favorite mushroom omelet.

With that idea in mind, Lille closed her eyes.

Chapter 5: The Hat Ceremony

CHARLES was sitting at the breakfast table when a shiver coursed through his body.

“A chill just ran up my spine for some reason,” he said, teeth chattering. Both Ark and Leo looked up at him, puzzled.

“In *this* heat?” Ark remarked.

“Did you catch a cold, Master Charlie?” Leo asked dubiously.

Summer was now well underway. They were lucky to be surrounded by a cool forest, but soon became drenched with sweat with the slightest physical exertion, regardless. Lille had come up with a product called a Wind Propeller, a small item that produced a magical breeze. The shop had been selling at least one a day of late.

Although Lille’s growth spurt had slowed, the fabric at the bust and hips of her clothes was gradually stretching tighter and tighter. The change in her size wasn’t too much of a problem when she wore her summer clothing, but her long-sleeved dresses probably didn’t cover the whole length of her arms anymore. Just as the seamstress from The Three Needles had predicted, it seemed she would need to order new clothes for winter.

“I made some hot ginger tea. Would you like some?” Lille asked, offering a mug to Charles.

“Yes, thank you, Lille. I don’t think this is a cold, though,” he said. He had barely touched his breakfast, and his skin was unusually pale. He looked so unwell that it was hard to believe him.

“If it’s not a cold, what is it? Some other illness?” Leo asked, concern clear in his gaze. Ark was peering at Charles with worry, too.

Stumbling over his words, Charles had started to mumble, “It’s p-probably—” when he was abruptly cut off.

BANG BANG BANG!

“*Eek!*” he squealed, eyes wide as if he had seen a ghost. Someone was knocking on the front door. *Hard.*

“That’s unusual. The shop’s another matter, but it’s rare that

anyone comes knocking on the house door,” Ark observed.

“What’re you so scared of, Master Charlie? It’s no big deal. I’ll answer it,” Leo said casually as he stood up.

Charles desperately latched onto his arm with a tight grip. “L-Leo. If anyone ever knocks on our door, tell them I’m not home. I’ll find somewhere to hide, and you can—”

“What?” Leo gave him an exasperated look.

Suddenly, the knocking punctuating their conversation went silent.

“...Did they leave?”

The instant Charles breathed a sigh of obvious relief, a roar boomed through the air and the front door flew open. No—the door was *ripped* open, *off its hinges*.

“Charles. You’re not pretending you’re not home again, are you?”

A low, measured voice reverberated throughout the house. It almost shook the ground beneath their feet. Behind the broken, empty door frame, an old man stood in the center of a howling tornado. With his long, silver hair and unnecessarily extravagant robe, he appeared to be a very grand, dignified man. His beard was so bushy that his mouth was completely obscured.

“N-No, o-of course not! I’d n-never do such a thing,” Charles stuttered, rooted to his chair as his eyes darted nervously around the room.

Leo was also stunned, gaping like a fish as he struggled to find words. Since no one else seemed able to talk properly, Lille realized she had to stand in.

“Um... Good morning,” she said to the old man, rising from her seat. She approached him and curtsied politely, at which point the immense gale swirling around him subsided.

“...Hmph. I’ve never seen you before. Who are you?” He narrowed his eyes.

“My name’s Lille. I’m one of Master Charlie’s apprentices.”

Slowly, he studied her from head to toe. He was quite imposing, perhaps thanks in part to his large height and sturdy physique, and his direct gaze was strong enough to pin someone to the spot. Lille chose not to look away, however; she could sense kindness deep within his light purple eyes.

“Very interesting,” he declared. “It’s rare that I meet someone who doesn’t shy away from me. I see Charles has found himself a

fine apprentice.”

Strictly speaking, it wasn't a matter of not being intimidated. She was simply frozen in place, unable to control her body.

“Th-Thank you, Master August...” Charles said weakly, finally staggering over.

“Master August...?” Lille blinked, looking between the two.

Charles was still deathly pale, hugging his shoulders. Meanwhile, August proudly threw out his chest and glared at Charles intensely. Lille had never, ever seen Charles like this before.

“Oh, right... Lille, Leo, this is Master August. He's my adoptive father and former teacher. He's also the director of the academy,” Charles said by way of introduction. Lille supposed he was referring to the huge magic school that Ark had told her about. If so, that meant August was a very prominent figure in society.

“Don't you think it heartless to go out of your way to ignore your 'father' and 'teacher' every time he tries to visit?” August snapped.

“Th-That's not what happened...” Charles protested. Lille opted not to mention that Charles had tried to run away mere minutes ago.

“I simply thought I should check in on you, as it's been quite a while. I can see you've taken two apprentices under your wing in that time. And I've never seen that familiar of yours before. You didn't inform me of any of these things,” August said, glowering.

“I apologize,” Charles said sulkily. “I thought it'd get in the way of your work.”

“Do you *truly* think you can handle educating youngsters? When you can barely handle your own daily life?”

“You have a point, Master August...” he moped.

“I see. In that case, I'll reside here for a while. Not for *your* sake, but for your apprentices'. Prepare a room for me at once,” August commanded resolutely. Upon hearing those words, Charles muffled a panicked shriek.



“EXCUSE me, Master August,” Lille called politely. “Let me show you to your room. We've just finished tidying it.”

“Marvelous,” he said, standing up from where he was waiting

in the living room. Charles had been sitting with him and was now staring wearily into the distance. It seemed like he'd been on the receiving end of a long, strict lecture. Lille also noticed that the front door had been fixed at some point.

In a way, Charles was an adoptive father to Lille, as well as her teacher. However, there was a stark difference between how he treated her and how August treated him, despite the parallels in their respective relationships.

"Oh? I have to say, this is a particularly quaint little room," August commented when Lille presented it to him. He placed his belongings down and eyed the furniture suspiciously.

"Well, we don't have any spare rooms, so you'll be sleeping in mine. I do hope that's okay," Lille said nervously.

"I beg your pardon? But where will you sleep?" He frowned.

"Leo's... The other apprentice is letting me sleep in his room," she explained.

"What on earth is Charles thinking? I can't force a young lady from her own room. Surely it's common sense to offer *his* room," he uttered in disbelief. Seeing how disgruntled he was, Lille attempted to smooth things over.

"The thing is, there are a few problems with Master Charlie's room. Besides, my room's the cleanest, so I personally suggested lending it to you. I think it's important that a guest has a space they can relax in. I do apologize that the bed's probably smaller than what you're used to, though..." She smiled sheepishly. "Oh, but don't worry. The sheets are all fresh."

August squinted as if dazzled.

"...Very well. Thank you," he conceded, beginning to unpack his things, and Lille moved to help him.

In actuality, August only appeared scary, due to his imperious attitude and stern manner of speaking. His presence and the aura he exuded, in contrast, were colored with a very gentle, kind feeling. He claimed he was staying at the house because he was concerned about the two apprentices, but Lille got the impression he was actually just worried about Charles.

"How old are you? I presume you're not an adult."

"I'm sixteen."

"And yet, you never went to magic school?" he questioned.

"No." She shook her head. "Where I'm from, there are no sorcerers."

“Where might that be?”

She told him the name of her home country, and August’s face clouded over.

“That place...” His eyebrows knitted. “I see. You must have been through quite an ordeal.”

Lille genuinely didn’t believe her past was all that traumatic, and it hurt her to see people so saddened on her behalf when she confided in them.

“How much magic do you know?” he asked, changing the topic.

“Master Charlie’s taking me through all the basics of sorcery,” Lille said. One of her textbooks still rested on the desk, and she picked it up. She flicked through its pages for a moment, before stopping to place a fingertip on the relevant section. “This is where I’m at right now.”

August peered over her shoulder. “How long has it been since you started studying?”

“About three months.”

August went silent for a moment. “...You’ve made fast progress. Perhaps you’re extremely talented. Either that, or Charles is a very good teacher,” he said, but then quickly corrected himself. “No—that couldn’t be.”

“That’s not true,” Lille said. “Master Charlie’s a wonderful teacher.”

She went on to describe every and any example of his competency that came to mind. She detailed how patient he always was, how much he had taught her about both magic and daily life, how much Leo and Ark adored him, and how successful his magic item shop was. At first, August appeared seriously doubtful, but eventually Lille’s enthusiasm overpowered his misgivings, and he listened without interrupting her until the very end.

“...I accept that he might be an excellent teacher, but that doesn’t mean I’ll excuse the way he’s holed himself up all the way out here,” he murmured, averting his eyes. Somewhere within those words, Lille could sense a vague hint of loneliness.



THAT day, August assisted in their lessons. While Charles

supervised Lille, August tutored Leo. It soon became apparent that Leo was still deathly afraid of the man; he couldn't reply with anything more than "yes" or "no." Normally, he overflowed with arrogance and smart retorts—but now, he was acting like a meek, little kitten. He even messed up his spells, and ultimately had to switch places with Lille.

Poor thing.

August was a strict teacher, but his instructions were very clear. Lille quickly realized that he was just as wonderful a mentor as Charles, although his style was vastly different.

Thankfully, Charles returned to his usual self once the lesson was underway. Every now and then, August glanced over at the other pair to see Charles's teaching in action, but he showed no signs of wanting to intervene.

Before she knew it, the day passed by, and it was time for dinner. August mentioned that he liked seafood, so she decided to include a fish dish in their feast. For the main course they made lemon *sole meunière* paired with a warm mushroom salad, and for dessert they drizzled apple compote over ice cream. Naturally, they froze the cream using magic.

Typically, they chose more flavorful dishes, but Lille didn't really mind either way. Leo, on the other hand, had prepared the meal with a disappointed scowl on his face.

"Charles. Have you no plans to move back to our home country?" August asked, holding his knife in an elegant grip. Lille wondered how on earth he would eat without getting sauce in his long beard, and she couldn't help but stare at him uneasily. He ate without spilling a single drop, however, and was a mustachioed paragon of polite dining.

"Sorry, but I don't," Charles said firmly, "although I'm sure you'll ask many, many more times."

"Is running that magic item shop really so much fun?" he asked in disdain.

"Well...yes, I suppose it is. Besides, I have my apprentices here to mentor."

"As I'm sure you're aware, I could take good care of your apprentices at my academy."

"But..." Charles hesitated. As he struggled to find the right words, August topped off his glass with more wine. They had opened a new bottle before dinner for the occasion, but it was

already nearly empty.

"Master August, isn't that enough...?" Charles commented timidly.

"Did you say something?"

"Uh, no..." he said, backing off.

August gulped down a large mouthful of wine, disregarding Charles's advice entirely. "You graduated top of your class, and even became a government official when I put in a good word for you. Despite all that, out of the blue, you resigned. You never even discussed the matter with me," August huffed.

"I really am sorry about that," Charles sighed. "But I thought I had already done all I could for the country."

"Because you prevented the sorcery war and became a hero?"

"Yes...and no."

"You've always been like this. Nothing you say ever makes sense," August said in frustration. "Surely, refusing to lend your powers to the country can only be detrimental to you."

"Even out here, I can do lots to help people," Charles insisted.

August's patience seemed to be wearing thin. As he tapped his fingers irritably against the table, he drank from his glass in increasingly shorter intervals. Eventually, the wine bottle was drained completely. Charles had barely had any, so August must have drunk the entire bottle himself.

"Charles. The bottle's empty," he remarked pointedly.

"Uh... I really think you ought to stop there, Master August. Especially since you can't really hold your liquor..." Charles winced.

"Quiet," August snapped.

Leo glanced over at Lille anxiously, trying to tell her something with his eyes.

"S-Sorry, but we don't have any more wine," she apologized. "The other bottle we have is for cooking." Further clued in by Charles's wariness, she had gotten the hint that things could go very badly if August were to drink any more. She hoped what she'd said would be enough to deter him from raiding the kitchen.

"Oh dear." He frowned. "In that case, water will do."

Lille dutifully filled his glass with water. Then, with a quick flick of his finger, the contents of the glass turned a deep red.

"What?!"

"Hey!"

She reacted at the same time as Charles. Leo's bottom lip quivered as if he were about to cry, while Ark roared with laughter from the top of his perch as though he found something extremely funny. August was the only one unfazed by the situation and he gulped down the magical wine without a moment's hesitation.

"Master August! I already apologized for everything! Stop being so childish!" Charles yelled, at the end of his tether. He shot up from his chair and slammed his hands on the table. "You know what you're like when you're drunk! The lectures never end! They're bad enough when you're sober!"

Lille and Leo flinched, looking up at Charles nervously. August, on the other hand, launched himself to his feet to face him. The chair toppled off-balance, falling behind him with a *crash*.

"You're the one who needs to stop being so childish. Your temper is far too short!"

"That's only when I'm with you! Besides, I've told you a million times not to show up here—I'll go visit *you*!"

"Well, it's your own fault for forgetting your promise to visit every month!"

"I literally visited you last month!"

"But you always leave so early!"

"*Because you do nothing but lecture me!*" Charles fumed. It was strange to see someone who was usually so composed shout so loudly. Lille was still struggling to work out if they had a good or bad relationship.

"Uh-oh. We've got a family quarrel on our hands now," Ark interjected.

"It's more like a squabble between two kids..." Leo said. "I can't deal with any more of this. I'm too tired."

"No problem." Ark fluffed up. "Leave this to me and Master Charlie. You two can go to your room and get ready for bed."

"Okay..."

Ark's wings fluttered as he swooped into the midst of the fight to try to calm things down. August's plate was still full of dessert, untouched. When Lille saw the melted ice cream, she felt slightly crestfallen. She had been really proud of how it came out, so it was a shame he hadn't tried it.



“**SORRY** about that, you two,” Charles said, ducking his head through the door. By that point, they had already taken their baths and had been relaxing in Leo’s room for a while.

“Is Master August okay?” Lille asked.

“Yeah. He eventually fell asleep, from drinking too much,” he said, shuffling into the room and sitting down next to her. His voice had gone hoarse, and Lille could only assume he’d had a fierce argument with August. “Sorry about your room, by the way.”

“No, it’s fine. Thank you for bringing the living room sofa in here. I’ll be more than comfortable.” She smiled, patting the soft sofa she sat on. It was big, too, so she had no doubt that she’d sleep well.

“From my point of view, it’s not fine. I gotta put up with *her* all night,” Leo complained bitterly. He sat on his bed reading a book, his curly hair still damp from the bath stuck to his forehead.

“I don’t mind being with you, though...” she replied.

“Unlike you, I’m sensitive to these things. I can’t sleep with someone else in the room.” He pouted.

“I really am sorry, guys. This could’ve been avoided if I just let him stay in my room.”

“We all know that’s a no-go zone, so whatever.” Leo rolled his eyes.

If Master August were Leo’s teacher, he most definitely wouldn’t be allowed to talk back like that, Lille thought.

Charles simply scratched his head awkwardly and gave a strained smile.

“That was the first time I’ve ever seen you angry,” Lille remarked.

“Haha...” Charles laughed stiffly. “How embarrassing that you had to see that. He’s not young anymore, but he still doesn’t hold back on the drink. Whenever he comes here it’s like he forgets himself and drinks too much. That’s why I wish he wouldn’t visit.”

Despite spending all evening quarrelling with him, Charles’s words were permeated with a sense of care and consideration for August.

“You must really love Master August,” Lille said softly. Charles didn’t reply, but he sat up straighter.

“...My parents died young, you see,” he began after a moment. “The one who took me in was the principal of my academy at that time—Master August. In fact, I was about the same age as Leo is

now.”

Lille was shocked to learn he was an orphan. Although she had been taken away from them, her parents weren’t dead as far as she knew. She recognized, then, just how significant it was that Charles called her his family.

“He was strict both in class and in our daily life, and had no consideration for my feelings whatsoever. Back then, I used to cry every day. I mean, I was a kid,” he said with a distant look in his eyes.

Lille patiently waited for him to continue. Leo had closed his book and was listening carefully.

“I ran away more times than I can remember. I would walk to my old house, where I used to live with my parents. Then, without fail, Master August would show up and take me back home. No matter how late at night it was or how well I covered my tracks, he always found me. He was an excellent teacher, but he didn’t seem to like children very much. At the time, I couldn’t understand why he bothered to look for me so hard.”

“But now you do?” she asked.

“...Yes. I think so,” he said solemnly, locking his fingers together. His faraway gaze was filled with a certain sadness. “In his own way, Master August loved me very much. I know it’s hard to believe given how tactless he is, but even now, I think he still sees me as that same child. Ever since he took my hand that day when he found me crying, he’s been looking out for me...”

Lille noticed that both Charles and August had the same lonely look in their eyes whenever they spoke about each other.

“I think Master August might be feeling lonely,” she noted gently. “Since you went so far away.”

“Huh? But it only takes a second to travel here using teleportation.” He raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“That’s not what I mean. It’s not just about where you live. It’s like...”

“No, no. I get what you mean,” Charles assured her. “Hmm... You may be right.” He sat deep in thought, plunging into his memories as if he were attempting to piece them back together.



THE next morning, Lille prepared some iced tea and a light sandwich for August. He had woken up late, and seemed grateful for the sandwich. Instead of eating, however, he kept pressing his hand against his head and groaning. He didn't appear to have much of an appetite.

"My head's pounding..."

"That's to be expected after drinking such a huge amount. In the future, *please* be careful not to drink so much that it harms you. Now—drink this," Charles said firmly, pouring a tonic infused with medicinal herbs into a glass. He set the cup down in front of August, whose face contorted upon seeing the liquid. It was the color of a bottomless swamp.

"Eugh. What an awful smell..." he complained. Nonetheless, he pinched his nose and downed the liquid in one unpleasant swig. "I do try not to drink when I'm alone. If I kicked the bucket all of a sudden, there'd be no one to come to my aid."

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that..." Charles sighed.

"I apologize for causing such trouble for you all. I was intending to stay a little longer, but I think it best that I leave today," August said nonchalantly, placing his cup down.

"...Huh? Already?" Charles faltered for a moment, looking as though he had just heard something from his wildest dreams.

"What's the problem? You didn't want me to come here in the first place. You should be delighted to see me go." August furrowed his brow.

"It's not that I didn't want to see you. It was just..." Charles trailed off. Even though he clearly wished August would stay longer, he couldn't bring himself to say so.

The same went for August; really, he wanted Charles to stop him from leaving, and that was why he was testing how Charles reacted rather than admitting his true feelings.

Why don't adults say what they mean?

"P-Please wait!" Lille interjected. Leo shot her a glare that said "Don't get involved," and she responded with an apologetic glance. She felt bad for Leo, but she couldn't bear to see Charles and August part in such a gloomy way. "I want Master August to stay a bit longer."

Charles looked relieved that she had intervened, but August was frowning in confusion.

"For what reason? Wouldn't you like your room back?" he

asked.

“Well...with you here, Master Charlie doesn’t have to do everything by himself in class. Also...um...you remind me of my grandpa, so...”

“Grandpa...?” He blinked, bewildered. Lille realized too late that she didn’t even know how old August was; perhaps she had offended him.

“O-Oh! Sorry if that sounded rude,” she said, rushing to explain. “It’s just...my grandpa was a strict man, but he always doted on me. I loved him very much. When I see you, I remember my time with him, so I...I couldn’t help but wish you’d stay with us a little longer.”

“...I see. It sounds like he was very precious to you...” August murmured, stroking his beard uncertainly. Charles stared in amazement, unused to seeing him so affected. “If you insist, I suppose I can stay a while longer...” he said bashfully.

She beamed. “Thank you very much!”

“Heh. Just for you, I’ll plan a lesson that’ll test your limits,” he announced proudly. Lille could see hot steam gently rising from his skin, and she suddenly felt warm inside. That meant she’d cheered him up—probably, anyway.

“Oh, that sounds wonderful.” She smiled. “Actually...there’s something else I want to try with you, too.”



“I thought it was going to be something more compelling than tending the shop,” August stated as he sat on a chair in Charles’s Magic Item Shop. Although it was a completely unremarkable chair, somehow, supporting August, it looked more like a lavish throne. It felt as though the shop had transformed into a magic school principal’s office.

“Still...” he hummed, peering about the shop with a hand on his chin. “It’s been redecorated since I came here last. Is that thanks to you? Before, it looked like a cluttered storage room that had been raided by pixies.”

“I spoke about the design with Master Charlie, then we redecorated together. Leo helped to tidy it up, too.”

“That’s a surprise. As long as I’ve known him, Charles was

always useless at anything other than magic. It's a good thing you and Leo are here now," he said, surveying the shelves full of grimoires and the hanging bundles of herbs.

"What was Master Charlie like when he was a student?" Lille asked curiously.

"Not too different from how he is now." August shrugged. "Of course, he was the most talented student by far, and yet...his head was always in the clouds. His peers kept a watchful eye over him due to that. For instance, when he became particularly immersed in a project, he often fainted from forgetting to eat or sleep."

She pictured Charles with a younger face, wearing a school uniform.

"Everyone respected him a great deal, but more than that, they loved him. They had the urge to help him or do things for him whenever they saw him," August recalled.

Lille nodded. "I most definitely understand that feeling." She was sure that Leo and Ark did, too. They were all working for him, after all.

"He had an unusual effect on me as well. So much so, that I did something very unlike myself."

"Are you talking about how you took him in after his parents died?" Lille guessed.

"Well, yes, but everything that came after that, too..." he began, before a knock on the front door cut short his reminiscing.

"Oh! Looks like we have a customer. Master August, would you like to help them?" Lille suggested.

"M-Me?" he said hesitantly.

"Yes. I'll be right next to you," she reassured him.

"But, I..." His bushy eyebrows furrowed in apprehension. Lille found the sight of him uncomfortably fidgeting weirdly wholesome. He looked like a grandfather meeting his grandchild for the first time.

"Look, they're here," she said in a hushed tone, before calling out merrily. "Welcome!"

August was standing as still as a statue, his legs glued to the floor. There was no way he could serve customers like that, so Lille forcibly dragged him by the sleeve until they were close enough to greet their guest.

"W-Welcome..." August said in greeting. His beard twitched—an indication he was making an effort to smile. Lille thought the

customer standing opposite him looked more alarmed than August did, but perhaps that was just her imagination.

Thus began August's lessons in customer service.



FOR the first customer...

"So, your baby cries too much during the night? Hmm... How about this music box? They're supposed to send babies right to sleep."

"Master August, not that," Lille shushed him in panic. "That one contains the call of a siren. This customer's husband is a sailor, so it could make his ship sink."

"Why would you stock something like that?!" he growled under his breath.

"S-Sorry about that." Lille took over. "What do you think of these fuzzy animal ears? They play animal noises when you put them on. Perhaps they'll calm your baby down."

"Indeed," August agreed. "I recommend you purchase the cat ones. Cats have been loyal companions to sorcerers since ancient times. Their cries have a tendency to comfort us."



FOR the second customer...

"So, you'd like to score higher than your rival on your exams? In that case, I recommend this grimoire. It's a rather difficult text, but at your age, it should put you ahead of your classmates... What was that? You can't read the ancient script? You fool! That is precisely why you do not receive high marks! Right—in addition, I'll throw in this dictionary. Use it well, and read very closely."



FOR the third customer...

"So, you've been getting heat rash whenever you wear robes recently? Then, I suggest you make a special order for a robe like mine. It's embedded with a particular type of magic fiber, which

makes it cool to the touch.”

“Wow, really?” Lille’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, but we don’t sell robes in our shop...”

“Goodness,” August huffed. “In that case, please start to stock some. Making something like that will be child’s play for Charles, I’m sure.”

“O-Okay.” Lille nodded. “But what should we do for right now?”

“Once they’re done, you can deliver them. So, first, I suggest we take down people’s details,” he said, before turning back to the customer. “Does that suit you? Yes? Then, please write your address on this piece of parchment.”



THAT evening, August slumped down on a chair wearily as Lille closed up the shop.

“Thank you so much for today, Master August. You were very helpful,” Lille said pleasantly.

“...I’m exhausted,” he admitted. “Is it always so busy?”

“There’s been a big increase in customers lately. The people we met today seemed very happy with their items, didn’t they?” she sang.

“...Perhaps.”

“I think so, anyway.” She smiled. “It’s because you were so persuasive. On my own, I wouldn’t have been able to sell so much.”

She thought back to the relief, delight, and renewed resolve on the customers’ faces. August had a dazed look in his eyes that suggested he was thinking about the day’s events, too.

“They had expressions I didn’t usually encounter when I taught at the academy long ago. Even when I was working for the government, my colleagues were all sour-faced old fogies,” he scoffed. “...I think I might understand what Charles was aiming for with this place.”

The joy of making people smile. The pleasure of directly doing something for individuals in their community, rather than faceless people she had never met. The process of coming to love oneself by helping others.

Everyone who visited the magic item shop regarded Charles

highly, and cherished the shop itself, too. Would August feel the same?

"I believe I did what you asked of me today," August said, turning to look Lille in the eye. His light purple irises glistened.

"Y-Yes, you did," she agreed.

"In that case, would you do something for me in return?" He grinned, one side of his mustache tilting upward.

A feeling of trepidation washed over her. She stood as straight as a soldier, her limbs going stiff. "Of course, if I can. It depends on what it is..." she said hesitantly.

Upon noticing her tense up, August's eyes softened, reminding Lille of when her grandfather used to give her candy. "Don't worry—I won't make you do anything unpleasant. In fact, consider it my thanks to you."



"**WHAT?** Her hat ceremony?" Charles said in surprise. He was portioning out their dinner—breaded white fish with tomato sauce—but his hands stilled when he heard the proposition.

"That's right." August nodded. "This young lady is sixteen, no? Usually, it's over and done with by the age of fifteen. Though it wouldn't surprise me if it never even crossed your mind, Charles."

August was much more reserved that night. He was enjoying the food without a single glass of wine. Perhaps he was tired from working in the shop all afternoon. Lille was glad for the chance to serve him her signature ice cream, this time before it melted.

"Well, you're not wrong... But isn't that a school tradition?" Charles replied.

"It's carried out at school as a matter of convenience. Really, it can be performed anywhere. Honestly—to think you were a government official with such a dire lack of knowledge..." He wrinkled his nose in disdain.

"Sorry..." Charles sulked.

Their conversation flew back and forth so quickly that Lille couldn't find a good time to speak up. She didn't know what they were talking about. Leo and Ark were listening with casual interest, so it appeared to be common knowledge among sorcerers, whatever it was.

There was a pause as August heaved a huge sigh and Charles hung his head in shame.

Lille seized the opportunity to ask, "Excuse me, but what's a hat ceremony?"

"Oh, of course... You wouldn't know about it, as you're from a different country. The hat ceremony is a coming-of-age ceremony for sorcerers," August explained.

Charles continued, "Every year, all sorcerers who turn fifteen that year come together to celebrate. In the past, each student was awarded with a three-cornered hat, which is how the ceremony got its name. However, as time went on, the hats were considered too old-fashioned, so they did away with them. Now, boys are awarded with brooches, and girls are awarded with pendants. Once the ceremony comes to an end, those sorcerers are considered adults."

"Indeed," August added. "All participants vow to pledge their magic to society, to use their magic to help others, and to live their lives as honorable adults. It is an extremely important occasion for sorcerers."

"...Is it really okay for me to be recognized as a fully-fledged sorcerer?" she asked doubtfully. After all, she'd only been practicing magic freely for a few months. She was using a textbook intended for first-years; she felt she was a long way from becoming a qualified sorcerer.

"By all means. Having witnessed your mental fortitude and your attitude in class, I deem you worthy. You shall participate with your head held high," August said firmly.

After a beat of silence, Lille nodded, replying, "...I will, Master August." She turned toward Ark and Leo to see what they thought.

"Great work, Lille!" Ark exclaimed. "If I remember correctly, you'll need two adults to be your witnesses. Luckily, we've got Master Charlie and the Great Master right here. You can definitely depend on them. I wish I could help, but I don't think I'd technically count."

"I've still gotta wait three years..." Leo sighed. "It's kinda weird that you're going ahead of me even though I know more stuff, but I guess it'll be my turn soon anyway."

She was happy to hear both of them offer words of encouragement.

"Hey, even *Leo* gave you his blessing!" Ark chortled.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Leo snapped.

"Thank you so much—both of you. And Master August, and Master Charlie, too." Lille smiled.

"I'm really sorry for not realizing sooner, Lille. I was thoughtless. I know it's such an important event, but it never even occurred to me..." Charles said, apologetically bowing his head, but Lille shook her head vehemently.

"No, no," she insisted. "I didn't know either, so it's not your fault."

"How about we do it tomorrow evening? The sooner the better, right? The living room's just about wide enough, so we can do it there," Charles said.

"T-Tomorrow? Will we be able to finish the preparations in time?" Lille fretted.

"I'll make sure of it," August said boldly. "I've already asked the current principal of the academy to send the relevant documents via teleportation."

"...Ever since you became director, you do nothing but ask unreasonable favors from the school. I really feel for the principal," Charles said, exhaling heavily.

"There's no point in having authority if one does not make the most of it," August retorted.

"Tomorrow evening..." Lille whispered to herself. It didn't feel real.

"Is that all right with you?" August asked her.

It was sudden, and a lot to take in, but perhaps better to do it soon than suffer the anxiety that came from having to wait, she thought. When she told August how she felt, he nodded, looking satisfied.

"You're quite right. In any case, I'd best not leave my duties unattended for too long. Once the hat ceremony is over, I'll return home," he decided.

"That's a shame..." Lille said.

Charles looked over at August with a clouded expression, watching him make short work of his ice cream. The following day would be very exciting, although Lille knew an undertone of loneliness would accompany it.



THE living room was decorated with countless floating candles, illuminating the space with a fairy-tale glow. Lille had changed out of her dress into a long robe, and she held a candle in one hand. The table was set up as an altar, and August was waiting for her on the other side of it.

“Are you nervous, Lille?” Charles asked from beside her. He was wearing a different robe than usual; this one was richly patterned.

With all the preparations for the hat ceremony in place, the atmosphere was even more reverent than Lille had imagined, and she felt as though it might completely engulf her.

“It’s like I’ve forgotten how to walk properly,” she said, biting her lip anxiously.

“You’ll be fine. I’m right here next to you. All you have to do is respond to what Master August asks you,” Charles said gently, taking her free hand in his own.

The warmth of his hand heated Lille’s pale, ice-cold skin. Her heart was beating so hard it was almost painful, but his touch calmed her, little by little.

“Okay.” She nodded. “I’ll be fine now.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

She walked slowly from one end of the room to the other, treading carefully so as not to trip over the hem of her robe. The flame of the candle flickered back and forth with each of her steps. She was scared to breathe too heavily in case it went out.

Somehow, she made it to the makeshift altar. August gave her a serious nod, and began to read from a large scroll. She could tell he was saying something important, but the words were too unfamiliar for her to fully understand.

“He’s basically saying you’ll be recognized as a fully-fledged sorcerer. Just in a more exaggerated way,” Charles whispered into her ear.

“Thou art Lille, a sorcerer.” Amidst the nonsensical jargon, she suddenly heard August say her name. She almost dropped her candlestick.

“Yes,” she replied, her voice shaking.

“Do you vow to use your magic for the good of the people, the good of society, and to refrain from any actions that may bring shame upon your mana?”

“...Yes, I do.”

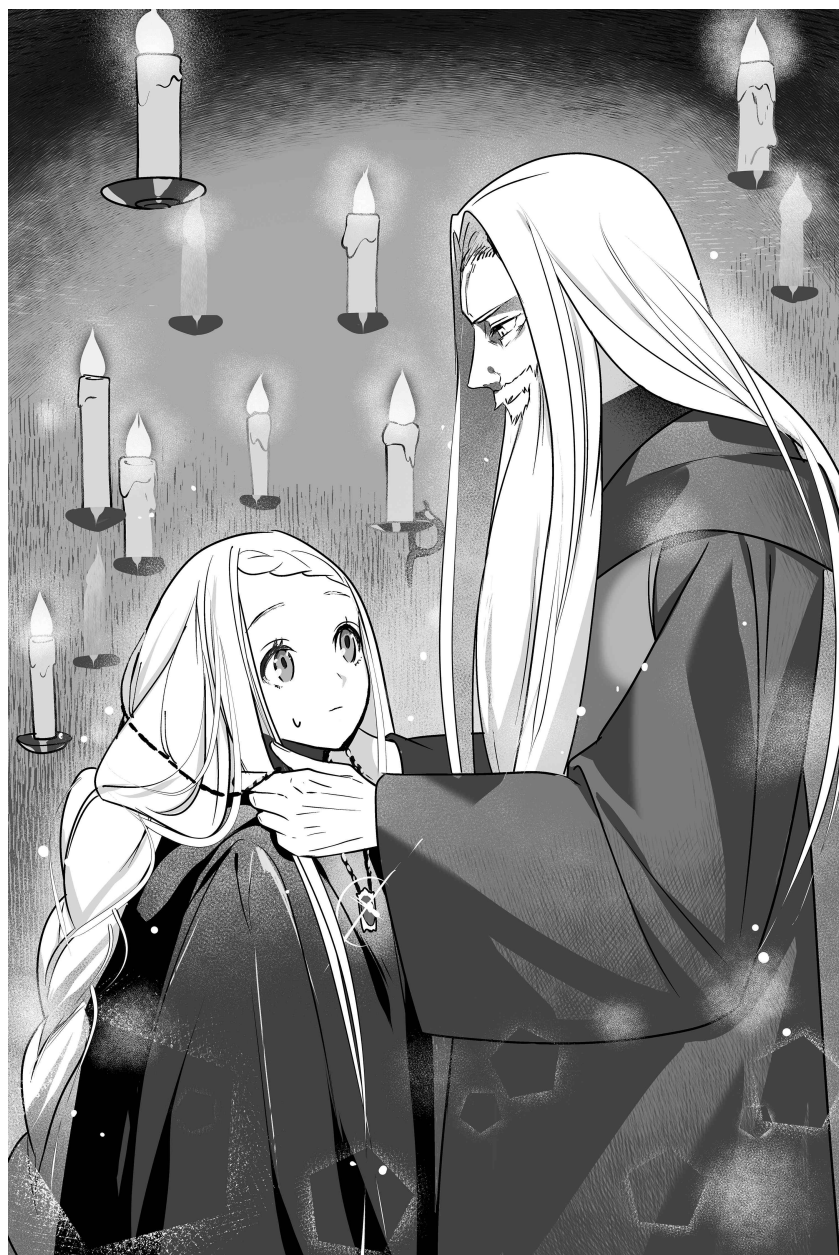
“Very well. Now, pass the flame to this candle.”

Lille reached out with her candlestick toward the tower of candles placed across the altar. She lit one using her own flame, then, with a clear *snap* of August’s fingers, the remainder of them swiftly ignited all at once.

“*Hic et nunc*, a fully-fledged sorcerer has been born!” he declared.

The warm, orange glow of the flames illuminated everyone’s faces. Charles, Leo, and Ark—who was in human form for the special occasion—all clapped.

“Now, for the presentation of your pendant,” August announced. He lowered over her head a silver chain with a jade-green stone attached to the end. With the added weight pulling lightly on her neck and the cold sensation of silver against her skin, reality finally began to sink in.



I'm actually a proper sorcerer now—someone who'll help lots of people.

Her vision began to blur, and the lights of the candles appeared to double. Charles brought a hand to the top of her head and patted it softly.

"Master Charlie, I..." she began. There was something she needed to say before the special atmosphere faded away—something she'd been meaning to say ever since she arrived. "I'm glad I was born a sorcerer. I'm glad I'm alive. You taught me how beautiful and wondrous this world is. Thank you so, so much for saving me. I couldn't have asked for anything more."

"Lille..." he breathed, touched. A single tear ran down his cheek. Lille didn't know what that tear might mean, but she could tell it was something warm. "...I should be the one thanking you..."

Almost as if he wanted to hide his tears, he wrapped Lille in a tight hug. In fact, it felt more like she was the one hugging him, rather than the other way around.



"**DO** you really have to go? Can't you at least stay until tomorrow morning?" Lille pleaded. After the hat ceremony concluded and they turned the living room back to normal, August had packed his bags.

"I believe it best if I leave on a high note. The longer I stay, the harder it'll become to leave," he replied. The teleportation circle was already glowing around the front door.

"I'm actually pretty fond of you, Grand Master. Seems like Lille's taken a shine to you, too, so feel free to stop by again," Ark said. He had turned back into a bird as soon as the ceremony was over and was perched on top of August's suitcase.

"Indeed. Next time, I'll bring souvenirs," he promised. "Hmm. Would you prefer something for humans or something for birds?"

"For birds, please," Ark said, appearing to smile.

Even Leo, who was completely stiff with nerves, stepped toward August. "I, um...I think you should come back, too. Your... um, your lesson was really helpful."

"I'm glad. I hope you'll continue to devote yourself to your studies. We shan't forget to perform your hat ceremony in three

years' time, too," August said proudly. He turned to walk toward the magic circle. "Thank you for having me."

All of a sudden, Charles tugged on the back of his robe desperately.

"Master August...!" he exclaimed.

"Goodness, Charles. What is it? You could've pulled me over."

"Just, please...take care of your health. Try not to drink too much, and don't ask too much of others," he said solemnly.

"I'm already aware. You always nag too much..."

"Also...!" he interrupted, a pout on his lips. The tips of his ears were tinged slightly pink. "Whenever I forget to visit, you're welcome to come to our house instead...*Dad*."

When August heard that final word, a hot burst of steam whooshed up from his face. Compared to the other times Lille had seen it happen, its intensity was in a class of its own. The same burst of emotion rushed forth from Charles, who was making a valiant effort to avoid all eye contact.

"They really are a hopeless pair," Ark chuckled, grinning at Lille. She grinned right back at him.



AFTER they saw August off, Charles could only make wooden, jerky movements, as though he'd been struck by a petrification spell. Slowly but surely, however, the stiffness wore off until he returned to normal.

"By the way, Lille—the stone on your pendant's jade-green, right?" he asked.

"Yes, it is." She nodded. "Does the color mean something?"

"Apparently, it matches the color of your internal mana. My brooch was jade-green, too; that must mean our mana's the same color," he explained. "...Could I take a closer look at your pendant?"

It was still around her neck, so she shuffled closer and placed the charm in his upturned hand.

"Hm...? This stone..." He squinted, staring fixedly at it resting on his palm.

"Is there something wrong with it?"

"No... It's just..." He hesitated. "Even if people often get

presented with different types of stones, they usually all have the same value. But yours is...”

“What is it? Did the Grand Master give her some cheap old thing, thinking she wouldn’t realize?” Ark asked.

“...No, on the contrary. This magic stone is so valuable, I don’t even want to say how much it costs out loud,” Charles said, wincing.

“What?!” Lille yelped. All of a sudden, the pendant felt a hundred times heavier around her neck.

“Lille, are you sure you didn’t hit the Grand Master with some sorta spell that makes old men dote on their grandchildren?” Ark laughed wryly.

“I don’t know how to feel... He’s my own father, but I never knew he had this side to him.” Charles blinked. Lille could understand how he felt; she’d witnessed a lot of surprising behavior from Charles himself these past few days.

August had left them with multiple gifts: the bittersweet love between a parting family, Lille’s pride as a sorcerer, an appreciation for honesty about one’s feelings, and, finally...

Charles’s tears.

One day, she would understand what they meant—and in the not-so-distant future, too.

Her magic stone seemed to glitter for a moment, glowing the same color as Charles’s mana.

Chapter 6: Leo's Past

LILLE couldn't quite believe her current situation.

Across the table sat Leo's mother, whose hair fell in golden-blond ringlets just like his. Next to her was his father, a mild-mannered, small man. And sitting next to Lille, pulling incessantly on Lille's sleeve, was Leo's five-year-old sister.

Leo was seated diagonally across from Lille, sighing heavily, his chin resting on his hands.

At some point, while enjoying the tea and snacks they offered her, she had choked and was presently having a coughing fit. Leo's mother kindly gave her a few firm pats on the back to help her catch her breath.

Why am I here again? How did this happen?

Lille thought back to her conversation the day before...



“WHAT? You're going away?” Lille said, blinking.

Usually, Leo rarely said more than “mm-hmm” or “uh-uh” during conversations at dinner, but tonight, he was the center of attention.

“Yeah. I went home for a while around this time last year, too, so my parents asked me to come back again,” he explained. “But are you gonna be able to do all the chores by yourself? That's the main thing I'm worried about.”

Fall had arrived, the nights growing increasingly chilly, so they had made some steaming *pot-au-feu* for the first time since spring. Lately, Lille was the one in charge of the main course, while Leo prepared the side dishes, bread, and dessert. Lille didn't quite have the same knack for making bread, and several times, she'd baked something completely inedible. Still—Leo had prepared some in advance, so they'd get by. The cleaning and laundry were much easier for her now, thanks to her magic.

“I think I'll be fine...but...” She chewed her lip hesitantly.

"Don't worry so much, Leo. If worse comes to worst, I can take human form to help out, y'know. I might be useless with the more intricate stuff, but even *I* can do a bit of laundry," Ark offered generously.

"That's true—I can help out, too," piped up Charles.

"You can help us by *not* helping, Master Charlie," Ark laughed.

"Oh, okay..." he said sulkily.

Lille was grateful for Ark's suggestion. She did feel a little sorry for Charles, but she couldn't help but think that the way the corners of his eyebrows tilted dejectedly was rather cute.

"The chores aren't a problem, but it'll still be lonely without you here, Leo. I usually see you every day," Lille said softly.

Leo's expression morphed into one of utter disgust. "What the heck? It's only for two or three weeks! Besides, it's not like we're close enough friends to miss each other," he said, wrinkling his nose.

"...Oh, I think I understand. You're excited to see your family, so it's not a sad thing from your point of view at all," she surmised.

Unlike Charles, who had lost his parents; Lille, who could never return to her homeland; and Ark, who, as a familiar, didn't really have a concept of family in the first place—Leo had somewhere else to call home. He had a family waiting for him. Surely he felt more homesick at Charles's house than he did in his actual one. Visiting family was supposed to be fun.

Then why does he look so sad?

"...I guess so." Leo shrugged. "I don't have to do chores at home, and I get to kick back a lot more, but..."

"But...?" Lille prompted.

"But *nothing*. Don't latch onto every single thing I say," he huffed.

"Sorry..."

Outwardly, he seemed his usual self, but Lille sensed an undercurrent of anxiety in his words and haughty attitude. Did he not want to go home? No—that wasn't right: it was more like he wanted to go, but something was worrying him.

"His parents always ask me to visit as well, but I can hardly just leave for a whole week. I want to catch up with them, but I never seem to get a chance..." Charles pursed his lips.

All of a sudden, Lille had an idea.

If Leo was feeling uneasy, and Charles couldn't accompany

him, then...

"What if I went with him instead?"

All three of them turned to look at Lille. She could feel their stares burning into her skin, and for a moment, she began to regret having suggested it with such enthusiasm. The sound of a sharp clap broke the silence.

"...That's a great idea, Lille!" Charles exclaimed, purifying the awkward atmosphere with a single sentence. "His parents seemed a little concerned when I told them I found a new apprentice, too. But once they've seen your face, they'll probably feel much better!"

"Hold up! I don't mind if Master Charlie comes, but why's *she* coming home with me?!" Leo protested.

"She can stand in for me. Plus, there'll be less attention on you with a guest there. You'd prefer that, right?" Charles smiled.

"But..."

"Sorry, Leo. If you really don't want me there, just say so," Lille said gently.

Leo furrowed his eyebrows indignantly in response, and for some reason, his tone grew even more furious. "I never said I *don't* want you there! You can come if you have to!" he shouted, turning his nose up in the air.

"And there you have it," Ark chuckled. "It'll be your first time going on a trip, right, Lille? I bet you're excited."

She realized he was probably right. She had never been away from home for an extended period of time—not on purpose, at least. She only went into town once a month to do the shopping, and she had no recollection of traveling with her family in her early childhood.

The idea of leaving Charles made her a little sad, but her excitement easily won out.

"Yes, I think so," she said, grinning. "Thank you for letting me come, Leo."

"Just so we're clear, this is *not* a vacation. You're just coming with me to my house! Nothing more!" he insisted.

"If we're all agreed, Lille will need to pack, too. I'll lend you my suitcase to put your things in," Charles said, grinning back at her.

"Thank you very much," she replied. "By the way, what should I do about my studies while I'm there?"

"Good question. I'll find you some textbooks to help you

review what you've learned so far. Though, it's just as important to give yourself some time to rest. It's your first ever trip, so don't force yourself to study if you get tired."

She nodded. "Okay."

She spent all evening getting ready for their departure. In the morning, Charles and Ark saw them off from the front door of the shop, and after teleporting, they soon reached the outskirts of town.

And that was how she had ended up at Leo's house.



"**TO** think the new apprentice was such a sweet girl! I didn't know you were close to Leo's age. The boy doesn't tell us a thing in his letters!" Leo's mother cooed.

Ever since Lille had arrived at their house, his mother had been exceedingly welcoming. His father was very smiley, too, and they seemed like a cheerful, talkative couple. Although Lille could see a physical resemblance between Leo and his mother, his personality was nothing like either of his parents'.

Leo shrugged. "Why would I bother writing about stuff that doesn't really matter?"

"I do apologize for him, Lille. He's far too blunt," his mother sighed, giving her a rueful look. "He's not bullying you at all, is he?"

"No, not at all," she said, shaking her head. "Leo's taught me all sorts of things. He's very patient."

"Oh, my—really?" His mother blinked. "...Well, perhaps he has a soft spot for girls."

"I do not!" Leo huffed. "Lille's not telling the truth, anyway!"

"Goodness... So, you *are* bullying her?" his mother said in feigned shock.

"No! I..." He gritted his teeth. Lille had been a little surprised to find out he was just as grumpy with his family as he was with her, but his mother was a master at dealing with his ill temper.

"He's in his rebellious phase, you see. It's simply adorable," she teased, grinning.

"Leo! Hug me!" his little sister demanded sweetly.

"All right, fine," he conceded. His sister stopped tugging on Lille's sleeve, and tottered over to Leo instead, climbing onto his

lap.

“Can you do my hair like hers? I wan’ a braid, too!” she said, pointing at Lille.

“Sure. I’ll do it for you later.”

Her cute, round face lit up with a wide smile. It appeared that Leo really did have a soft spot for his sister.

“Would you like some more tea, Lille?” Leo’s mother asked cheerfully, holding the refilled teapot out toward Lille’s cup. Whether it was thanks to the quality of the leaves or how skillfully it was brewed, Lille didn’t know, but she was taken aback by just how delicious the tea Leo’s mother made was. She thought the tea she made at home was good, but it didn’t even compare.

“Thank you, but I don’t think I could manage another drop,” she replied. Her stomach was so full of liquid that it would probably wobble like jelly if she poked it.

“Oh dear! I’m sorry—I suppose I did force too much on you...”

“No, no.” Lille shook her head politely. “I just kept drinking because it was so delicious. I should be the one apologizing for eating so many of your snacks.”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it.” She grinned. “Let’s pull out all the stops for dinner, too! Do you prefer fish or meat, Lille? Cream stew or tomato stew?”

“I like chicken and white fish. I’m happy with any kind of stew, but...if I had to choose, I’d say tomato.”

“My wife’s doting on you so much because Leo’s never brought a girlfriend home before,” Leo’s father chuckled. Lille thought he was a calm, gentle man—but with that one sentence, he effectively threw a grenade into the room.

“SHE’S NOT MY GIRLFRIEND!” As expected, Leo exploded, yelling at the top of his lungs. His skin burned bright red all the way to the tips of his ears. “*Hmph!* I’m going to my room! Unless dinner’s ready, don’t you DARE speak to me!”

He left the room, his stomps thundering across the floor. As she watched him go, Leo’s mother whispered, “After seeing his face as red as a tomato, I admit I’m a little hungry. Let’s have tomato stew with dinner.”

In that moment, Lille realized that Leo’s mother was the backbone of the household. His father was the head of the family, and Leo himself had a very strong will, but his mother had the most amazing ability to remain unfazed by anything and everything.



THEY showed Lille to a small room at the very end of the upstairs hallway. It faced the sun and was immaculately clean. The furniture was a matching set. She got the feeling it was a little too lavish to have always been a guest room; perhaps they had gone to the trouble of clearing it out especially for her.

“Get yourself settled. I’ll come get you once dinner’s ready,” Leo’s mother said, smiling.

“I will. Thank you very much,” she replied, smiling in return.

She had asked to help with dinner, but her offer was swiftly turned down, so she decided to relax in her room instead. Casting her gaze across the space, she discovered it wasn’t all too dissimilar to her room back home. The furniture, curtains, and bedding all had the same feminine charm.

In fact, the decor wasn’t the only thing that reminded her of her room; she felt protected by a warm, calming sensation that also enveloped her at home. Just in case, she’d brought the potpourri Charles gave her, but it seemed like she would have no trouble sleeping after all.

“Oh, right. I should study,” she said.

Charles had told her not to force herself, but she didn’t want to disappoint him by forgetting everything she had learned. If possible, she wanted to perfect everything she’d learned so far—or try to, anyway. Then Charles might even praise her when they finally saw each other again. Not to mention, she didn’t really know what to do with herself when there were no chores or shop duties to attend to.

During her imprisonment in the tower, every day had been full of nothing. Yet, within nearly six months she’d become totally accustomed to her new lifestyle. It was a rather striking transformation.

She sat at the desk, then pulled her textbooks and bundle of notes out of her bag. There was already a quill and a full inkwell lined up on the desk, she noticed gratefully.

The textbooks Charles had picked out for her covered magical history, herbology, and ancient script—probably because he didn’t anticipate her casting any spells at Leo’s house. The book on magical history promised to be particularly interesting; it read like a novel, and Lille was partial to a good story.

“Let’s start with this one,” she said to herself.

She flicked through the book. It looked easy enough to read, and she saw that some of the pages included illustrations. Charles had probably chosen that particular book to match her reading level. It concerned all sorts of things Lille knew next to nothing about: the origins of magic, the history of Leo's home country...

Naturally, she had a healthy thirst for knowledge, but she had an ulterior motive for starting with this book.

Holding her breath, she flipped to the publication page at the back. It had been published rather recently.

If I'm lucky...there might be a detailed account of what happened when Master Charlie put a stop to that sorcery war.

When she first heard the term, she had seen Charles's face cloud over, and she found herself unable to ask him about it. It was likely a painful memory for him, and she was sure he wouldn't want to talk about people getting injured and dying, should such sad events have transpired. Still—if she was going to find out, she would rather research what had happened on her own than accidentally hear it from a stranger.

"Okay, let's do this!" she said resolutely, turning to the first page with a sense of determination.

The history of a country where magic was a part of everyday life was completely different from what little she knew about her home country. It was a really engaging text, and she felt more like she was reading an adventure novel than a history book. Soon she became entirely engrossed in reading, losing all track of time...until she came across a word she didn't know. She hadn't brought a dictionary with her because they were heavy, and Leo had told her she could borrow one of his family's.

She decided to ask Leo for one—hopefully, his bad mood had subsided by now.

Leo's mother had said his room was the one just next to the stairs, so she tiptoed to the door and stood in front of it timidly.

"Leo?" She knocked hesitantly. If he was sleeping, she'd be in trouble. "Can I talk to you?"

"...What is it?" he replied from the other side of the door. He sounded a little tired, but otherwise like his regular self. Lille breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, I was reading my textbook, and there's a word I don't understand. Is it okay if I borrow your dictionary?" she explained.

Silence.

Just as Lille was about to give up, she heard Leo click his tongue, then rustling noises from within the room. Unsure if she was allowed to enter or not, she stood awkwardly in the hallway. Finally, the door opened with a *click*.

“...You can take this back to your own room,” Leo muttered, pushing the dictionary through the incredibly narrow gap between the barely open door and the doorframe.

“Th-Thank you. I’ll give it back later,” Lille said, turning to walk away.

Suddenly, he spoke again, and she stopped in surprise.

“...Hey, listen. Your room...” He trailed off mid-sentence, then abruptly dropped the subject. “Never mind.”

“Oh, yes. It’s a lovely room, isn’t it?” she supplied, guessing at what he was trying to say.

“That’s not what I meant, but...why do you think that?” he asked.

“Because there’s a nice, warm feeling in there. A lot of sun comes through the window, too.”

“Mm... All right,” he replied noncommittally. Lille didn’t know what to make of his expression—somehow, there was a hint of both sadness and happiness in his gaze. “Please take good care of that room, okay? Don’t spill anything or damage anything. Not in there.”

His tone turned far more serious than usual, and Lille could tell he truly meant it.



BACK in her room, Lille considered what Leo had said.

“Please take good care of that room.” The desperate cadence of his voice had almost made it sound like he was begging her.

Given how tidy it was, and the lack of any signs that someone lived there, she supposed it wasn’t a room they normally used. However, if it was so important to Leo, he must have some sort of emotional attachment to it.

“Maybe it used to be his room, but now it’s the guest room...?” she mused with a finger to her chin. “Hmm... No, I think there’s more to it.”

He had spoken about it as though it were a cursed piece of

treasure: something incredibly valuable, something he desperately wanted to touch—yet couldn't. Since Leo didn't talk about himself very often, Lille was largely ignorant about his personal life. Even so, if she asked him, it was extremely unlikely he'd tell her anything.

“...Oops!”

Caught up in her own thoughts, she had snapped the nib of the quill she was using to write notes. In search of a replacement, she opened the desk drawer.

The drawer was utterly bare, not a quill in sight. Casually, she moved to shut it again, but then sensed something off, her hands freezing in place.

She felt a faint warmth emanating from the bottom of the drawer.

She reached further inside, running her hand over the wooden surface. Suddenly, the drawer's bottom popped out, and she worried for an instant that she'd broken it. She could feel another layer of wood underneath, however, which indicated the bottom was removable by design.

“What could this be...?” Lille blinked curiously, peering into the drawer. Hidden between two panels was a single book—or, more precisely—a notebook. She couldn't be sure, though, just looking at the cover. To go to such lengths to conceal the book, its owner likely hadn't wanted anyone else to find it. Perhaps a past guest had stored it there.

She knew she shouldn't read it, but couldn't suppress the excitement and curiosity bubbling within her. With cautious fingers, she opened it to the first page.

Lines of neat handwriting filled her field of vision. Slowly, she read what they said, her eyes so transfixed by the words that she even forgot to blink.

“Today I found out I caught the plague. I might die soon. But even if I'm gone, I know my little brother Leo will stay strong.”

It was a diary. And it probably belonged to Leo's older sister.

Lille swiftly closed the book with shaking hands, knowing it wasn't appropriate for her to see something so private. Her heart was still pounding even after she put the diary back in the drawer, exactly as she'd found it.

The fact that Leo had an older sister was new information to Lille. The additional fact that Lille hadn't met her earlier that day

probably meant that she was already...

All of a sudden, she realized what Leo meant when he said "Please take care of that room," and tears blurred her vision. This room had once belonged to his older sister.

Does Leo know about this diary? Does any of his family? No—if they did, they wouldn't bother to hide it in such an obscure place.

She didn't have the right to read any more, but if it was full of heartfelt messages about Leo, Lille had an idea of why she had written it in the first place.

When a knock at the door resounded through the silent room, Lille jumped out of her skin. She felt as though she'd been caught doing something she wasn't supposed to.

"Mom says to come down. Dinner's almost ready," Leo called from the other side of the door.

"Okay! Thank you," she replied. Hearing Leo's voice, her heartbeat began to thrum even louder. Should she tell Leo? Or would it be better to tell his parents first?



"**WHAT'S** wrong, Lille? You're squeezing that fork to death," Leo's mother said with upturned brows, concern clear in her tone. They were supposed to be eating dinner, but Lille kept zoning out, lost in thought about the diary.

"S-Sorry," she apologized.

"Are you nervous because it's your first time visiting someone else's house?" Leo's father asked gently. In truth, she felt terrible that she had read their daughter's diary.

"It is her first day here, after all. But you're staying for a while, aren't you, Lille? She has plenty of time to open up a bit more."

"Will you still be here tomorrow, Lille? Wanna play with me?" Leo's little sister asked, her eyes shining with excitement. Her mouth, on the other hand, was stained orange with tomato sauce.

"Of course! We can play loads," Lille promised.

"Yaaay! Let's play with dolls!"

"You have more than one doll? Wow! I can't wait to see them," she said, smiling. Lille only knew how children had played ten years ago, so Leo's little sister was more knowledgeable in that respect. In fact, it was more likely she would end up playing with Lille, rather

than Lille playing with *her*.

“Yeah! My big sister had one ages ago, so now I have two!”

“Huh? Your big sister...?”

Leo’s mother looked over at them with wide eyes. His father was trying his absolute hardest not to let any emotion show on his face whatsoever. Leo was...

Lille was too scared to even look at him.

“So, you have enough dolls to share with Lille, don’t you?”

Leo’s mother changed the subject, her throat tight. His little sister simply grinned, oblivious to the change in atmosphere.

“Yup! I’ll let her borrow one.”

“Oh, okay... Thank you.” Lille smiled, feigning ignorance. The tension in the air finally dissipated. Either they didn’t want Lille to know about Leo’s sister, or they simply didn’t want to talk about her.

When she peeked at Leo out of the corner of her eye, she could see him hanging his head and biting down on his bottom lip until it turned white. He appeared to be in a great deal of pain, as if willing himself not to break.



“**LEO?** Can I speak to you for a minute?” she called, just as he was about to return to his room after dinner.

“What is it? Is there something else you need help with?” Leo replied irritably. He rolled his eyes, but stopped nonetheless.

“W-Well, yes... Sort of. It’d probably be easier to explain if you came to my room.”

“Ugh...” he groaned. “Don’t wanna. I’m full and sleepy.”

“Don’t be like that,” she scolded. “Please?”

“...Fine.”

It was the first time she had ever told a lie. She hadn’t known her chest would ache so much or weigh so heavy with guilt. Ever since she had found the diary, the pressure of keeping it a secret made it feel like her insides were being crushed. That was new to her, too. She hated to think that Charles was constantly enduring a similar pain. It wasn’t easy to hide things. Maybe Charles couldn’t tell Lille because he thought she wouldn’t be able to cope with what he revealed. She wasn’t someone he could rely on with such heavy

matters.

"I wish I could stop people from feeling like they have to lie..." she murmured. She didn't want anyone to suffer those emotions—not Charles, not Leo, not herself.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"O-Oh, no, I... I was just talking to myself," she stuttered. She ignored how Leo's eyes narrowed in suspicion, and she opened the door to her room. "Come in," she said, welcoming him with a forced smile.

Begrudgingly, he trudged inside.

"Um... Am I taking proper care of the room?" she asked, noticing the way Leo was carefully inspecting it—almost as if he were searching for signs of his sister.

"I haven't come in here for about a year, so I can't be certain, but...I think it's fine? Probably," he said unsteadily, despite doing his utmost to keep his voice even. Lille knew how he felt, and she pressed her lips tightly together. If she wasn't careful, she would cry before she had even told him anything.

"What's wrong? You're making a weird face," Leo said bluntly.

"Huh? I am?"

"Yeah. Like you were trying not to yawn or something."

"Oh..." Her shoulders suddenly felt a lot lighter. For once, she was grateful for Leo's hilarious lack of tact.

"...Leo, I'd like you to look at this," she said, holding the diary out to him.

After glancing briefly at the cover, he tilted his head in confusion. "What is it? Your notebook?" he guessed.

Lille shook her head and pushed it into his hands. "I wasn't sure if I should discuss it with your parents first, but I think your older sister wrote it for you, so..."

As soon as he heard the words "older sister," Leo's eyebrows shot up. His wide eyes swam with a mixture of both shock and sadness, wavering like the surface of a full, heavy bucket of water.

"D-Does that mean...this book was...my sister's?" he asked shakily. His gaze alternated between Lille and the diary in his hands.

Lille nodded. "The desk drawer has a fake bottom. I found it in there," she explained.

"I... I..." His voice cracked. He stared at Lille pleadingly, and she placed a hand over his on top of the diary.

“Leo...”

“No... I can’t read this...!” he yelled in panic.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m *scared*! What if she hates me?!” he choked out.

Why would she hate him?

It was clear from the very first line of her diary that she had only ever been worried about him.

“Of course she doesn’t,” Lille assured him in a hushed tone.

“How can you say that?! You don’t know anything! You have no idea what I did to her! B-Because of me, she...” Leo sobbed, his entire body trembling. “She wasn’t *human* anymore!”

Suddenly, a bright, amber light began to radiate from Leo’s skin. By the time Lille realized that it was his mana racing out of control, she had opened her eyes to see nothing but floor. She assumed over-absorbing his mana must have made her collapse again, just like that time in the forest with Charles.

She had a vague feeling she could hear Leo’s voice in the distance. Then she felt something warm touch her right hand. With what little strength she could muster, she grabbed on to it. With her left hand, she felt something hard and rectangular.

I want to know.

I want to know the pain Leo feels. I want to know how his sister truly felt.

Just as she lost consciousness, the magic stone on the end of her pendant seemed to grow warm against her chest.



WITHIN the darkness, a small, jade-green light glowed in front of her. It glittered, as if enticing her to follow. Lille woke in a sleepy haze, absentmindedly reaching toward it.

She was still tired, and her body felt heavy. She wanted to go back to sleep, but wanted to chase after the glimmering light even more. However—if she pursued it, she would have no choice but to unlock the power hidden deep within her.

Do you really want that? a voice asked in her mind.

I do. I’m ready.

She held that answer in her heart and approached the green light. She had been too far away to see it before, but now she

noticed a door right in the middle of the light. On the other side she could see bright amber mana alongside faint orange mana. The amber belonged to Leo, so the orange was probably...

She opened the door. Amber and orange light came rushing into the dark room, completely engulfing it. Thus, Lille's powers awakened.



"I'M sorry, Leo. I know I said I'd go into town with you today..."

A girl was sitting up in a bed, speaking to Leo. She was around the same age as Lille, perhaps slightly older. She had a gentle aura about her, and she looked so much like Leo that it was like seeing a female version of him.

"I don't care about that. Just focus on getting some good rest." Leo's voice was a little higher than Lille was used to. He looked younger, too. Both his face and tone of voice were more relaxed, and—unlike the Leo she knew—he seemed to be a docile, calm boy.

"...Thank you," the girl said. As she lay back, Leo tucked her under a blanket. She closed her eyes, but Leo stayed, staring at her with obvious concern. All of a sudden, she opened her eyes, and laughed mischievously when she caught him looking.

"Honestly! You'll catch my cold, y'know? Go back to your own room already," she said, grinning.

"All right," he conceded. "Get well soon...okay?" He reluctantly plodded toward the door.

As soon as he left, the girl fell into a violent coughing fit.

"...How much longer can I pretend it's just a cold?" she wheezed pitifully.

Lille attempted to pat the girl on the back, but her arm slipped straight through to the bed. She walked over to a full-length mirror, but her reflection was nowhere to be seen.

She realized she was viewing the past. When she first told Charles about her magic, he'd said that with practice it would be possible for her to sense lingering memories from places or objects. What she was seeing was most likely the memories left behind in the diary—or in the room itself.

Eventually, the girl fell asleep. Relieved, Lille walked over to the door and opened it. On the other side, another version of the

room she was currently standing in awaited her.



THE girl was deathly thin, and her glossy, blonde curls had grown brittle and dry. It appeared that quite some time had passed since the scene Lille had previously witnessed. The girl had a nasty, hacking cough, and the hand she used to cover her mouth was stained red when she let it fall.

“...I don’t think I have much time left,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

Two knocks sounded at the door, followed by Leo’s voice.

“Are you awake?” he called from the other side. The girl quickly stuffed her hands underneath the blanket.

“Yes! Come in.”

Leo timidly opened the door and slipped inside. He was wearing longer sleeves than before. Lille was amazed by how well the girl could fake such a cheerful smile.

“Mom said I shouldn’t come to your room too much,” he said shyly.

“Well, it’d be bad if you caught it, too. There’s a nasty cold going around this year.”

“...Is it really just a nasty cold? Isn’t it weird that you’re still not better after all this time? Maybe you should get a different doctor to check you out properly...” Leo worried, frowning at her in concern.

“I’ll be fine. I mean, I have an appetite and everything. You worry too much, Leo. We need to toughen you up before you enroll in magic school next year,” she said with a smile.

“I guess... But, I don’t wanna go to magic school,” he said, pouting. “Everyone has to live in a dorm there, don’t they? I don’t wanna leave you!”

“You’re the first sorcerer in the family, remember? That’s why Mom and Dad are going all out to get you into magic school. If they heard you say you don’t want to go, they’d faint!”

“But... But...”

“I’ll be better by then, so I’ll just come and see you whenever you’re free. Don’t give up on your studies, okay?” she said in encouragement.

“...Okay. I won’t,” he promised.

Leo left the room only after she insisted. Lille stepped through the door frame with him, and the scene changed once again.



“NO! No!”

The girl was coughing up blood, right in front of him. She couldn’t hide it anymore.

“...I knew it. It’s not a cold after all. Did you already know?” Leo asked in a panic.

She gasped for air, lying weakly on the bed. Every time she inhaled, her chest heaved, making a terrible wheezing noise.

“I’m sorry, Leo. For hiding it...” she said, her voice coming out no louder than a whisper. Dark circles had hollowed out the skin under her eyes.

“Why?” he cried. “Why didn’t you tell me the truth?!”

“Because I knew I’d probably die. I wanted to make sure you were smiling during the time I had left.”

Leo’s eyes widened in despair, and a pained scream spilled from his throat.

“You can’t die! You’re lying!”

“I’m not...lyi—” Another coughing fit interrupted her.

“No!” Leo yelled. The girl dizzily collapsed into Leo’s arms. “... Can you hear me? Stay with me!”

She tried to say something, but no words escaped her blood-stained lips.

“No... I don’t want you to die...!”

Light cascaded from Leo. It enveloped the entirety of the girl’s body, then swiftly disappeared. Not long after, a healthy pink brightened her pale complexion, and her eyes shot open in shock.

“Leo...was that...?” She struggled to find the words. She could do nothing but stare at him, still propped up by his arms.

“Did I just use healing magic...?” Leo blinked in wonder. “I’ve never done that before...”

“*Don’t*, Leo. Everyone in this country knows you shouldn’t use magic to cure illness or prolong someone’s life,” she pleaded with him desperately, despite the shallow coughs punctuating her breaths.

“Do you think I care what other people think?! We can just keep it a secret! Why *shouldn't* I try? Now I might actually be able to save you!”

“Leo...”

“Don’t worry, okay? There’s no way I’ll let you die,” Leo declared, grabbing her hand and holding it tightly. Leo stayed with her all night, watching her intently, as if he feared she would die as soon as he looked away.

Once morning came, Leo finally nodded off to sleep, slumping onto the girl’s bedsheets. Lille worried when she saw him grimace, but was soon reassured by his light, regular breaths. The girl showed no signs of waking, either.

After making sure they were both fast asleep, Lille opened the door once more.



WHEN she stepped into the room again, the air was uncomfortably stagnant.

The girl lay unmoving on the bed, her bones protruding through her fragile skin. Her body was so devoid of energy that it had turned a deathly pale gray color. Her heart struggled to beat, and Lille quickly realized that her soul was connected to her body by only the thinnest of threads. Given how beautiful she was before succumbing to sickness, it was heartbreaking to witness her falling apart.

“I won’t let you die... You’re still alive, see...?”

At the side of the bed sat Leo, obsessively casting healing magic on the girl over and over again. His eyes were sunken, and his appearance was so haggard that he looked ill himself.

It was such a gut-wrenching sight that Lille wanted to look away, but she couldn’t turn back now. What else had she expected when she’d wished to feel Leo’s pain?

Suddenly, with a sharp knock on the door, someone else entered the room. There stood Charles—just as Lille knew him. Despite Charles’s abrupt entrance, however, Leo didn’t look away from the girl. Not even once.

Charles approached him without hesitation.

“It’s time to stop now,” he said, pulling Leo’s hands away from

the girl.

"No! Get off me! *Mmgh!*" Leo struggled in his grip. "Who the heck are you, anyway?! You can't just let yourself in!" Finally, Leo looked up at Charles. Lille didn't miss the way his eyes widened for a split second; she'd had the same reaction when she met Charles for the first time.

"My name's Charles. I'm here to pick you up," he said calmly.

"Charles...? Are you...that sorcerer from the war?" Leo blinked. Charles nodded, silent. "And? What could someone so powerful want with me? Where are you trying to take me? The infirmary? I won't let you. I'm never leaving this room."

"You *have* to stop trying to heal your sister. All you're doing is prolonging her suffering."

"Are you telling me to just let her die?!" Leo shouted hysterically.

"I'm telling you to give her the freedom to rest in peace. Have the kindness to let her pass with her humanity still intact," Charles told him, speaking more firmly.

Leo went rigid. "What do you mean, with her humanity still intact...?" His voice wobbled. "If she dies, that's the end... There won't be any hope left. But right now, she's still alive...!"

"What don't you understand?" Charles asked brusquely. His tone was so frosty that Lille could feel goosebumps forming on her skin, even though she wasn't physically there. He was furious. Not only that—he was miserable. "Your sister's body is already dead. It can't support her anymore. And yet you keep dragging her soul back over and over again. Because of your actions, she's experiencing her final moments in an endless loop. Normally, we only ever have to experience the pain of dying once. Your sister, however, is going through it continuously."

"Wh—...What...?"

Charles's words cut like a knife. The cold, hard truth ripped Leo's heart into a million pieces. Lille could tell that saying them had torn a hole in Charles's heart, too.

"I suppose no one ever told you what you need to know as a healer. The reason we shouldn't prolong someone's lifespan is because they stop being human."

The sorcerer's taboo. That person wouldn't be human anymore. The explanation Charles had once given her now felt so much heavier in Lille's memory.

“...Aah...” Leo sobbed, his limbs trembling violently. Although his eyes were blurred with huge tears, he refused to relinquish the girl’s hand.

Charles gazed at him with sorrowful eyes. “It’s time to say your final goodbye. You can do it. I know you can,” Charles encouraged him, wrapping his hand around Leo’s tiny fingers. Leo’s entire body shook with sobs, but eventually he nodded weakly.

He let go of the girl’s hand. Without the healing magic keeping her heart beating, her life force gradually grew weaker. Right before she died, spots of orange light surrounded her, but Charles and Leo took no notice. Perhaps Lille was the only one who could see it. The orange lights condensed into a little ball, and disappeared under Leo’s skin, as though he’d absorbed it.

Charles put a hand to the girl’s neck, silent for a moment.

“...She’s now at peace, I believe,” he announced to Leo in a gentle tone.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...!” Leo wailed, wrapping the girl’s lifeless body in a tight embrace. He bawled uncontrollably, his entire being shattered. Hearing his howls of anguish, Lille feared he would destroy both his throat and his mana.

Charles stood at his side throughout his entire breakdown, until eventually, he ran out of tears.

“...You’re not eligible to enroll in magic school anymore,” Charles told Leo, who was so exhausted that he was little more than an empty husk. He glanced up when Charles spoke, but his expression was blank. “We’ll need to keep an eye on you for a year or two to see if you can keep your healing magic under control. Once we decide whether you’re in a fit state to attend school, you’ll be able to apply to the academy again.”

Leo said nothing. He simply stared, his hollow gaze fixated on the girl. Charles placed his fingers under Leo’s chin and tugged, forcing him to make eye contact.

“Until then, come live at my house. You need to learn. You need to fully understand both the power you possess and the wrong you’ve done.” Charles’s sincere, direct gaze was reflected in Leo’s empty irises. “From this day forward, you’ll be my apprentice, Leo.”

Leo took Charles’s hand. Then, fingers interlocked, they left the room together.



“HEY! Wake up!” Leo’s voice rang in her ears. “...Damn it! What should I do?!”

The floor was hard and cold beneath her cheek. Evidently, she was back in the present.

“Snap out of it...! Lille!” The sound of her name pulled her out of her state of half-consciousness. It was the first time Leo had ever called her by name.

She sat up, and Leo breathed a sigh of relief. He quickly stiffened again, however, when he realized she was crying.

“Hey... What’re you crying for?! Did you hurt yourself when you fell?” he asked. Lille shook her head, leaving Leo to flounder as he watched her weep.

“Leo...” Lille interjected, “Your sister doesn’t hate you.”

“...How do *you* know?”

“Because I saw her. I saw both of you.”

“Huh...? What’s that supposed to mean...?” He frowned.

“Put your hand over your heart.” Lille guided him, taking his hand and pushing it against his chest. She could feel his heartbeat.

“The orange mana is your sister’s. Just before she passed away, she left it to you. Since she wasn’t a sorcerer, it might be a little hazy, but...you can see it, can’t you?” she said softly.

Leo squeezed his eyes shut, concentrating. After a moment, they snapped open.

“Is...is it really hers?”

“It is. You can feel her warmth, can’t you?” She smiled through the tears. “Wherever she is, she’s not suffering anymore, Leo.”

Leo crumpled to his knees and curled up, clutching his chest. As he huddled on the floor, streams of tears rolled down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry... I really am...” he said to the mana within him, sniffing. “And, thank you...”

At last, Leo was beginning to properly grieve his sister’s death. In those dreadful scenes from Leo’s past, Lille had seen him wail and shriek in deep despair. Now his tears fell like the light pitter-patter of rain on a warm evening.



AFTER a few minutes, Lille tried to quietly leave the room to give Leo some space, but he stopped her with a hand to her arm.

"I want you to read it with me," he pleaded, looking up at her with sweet puppy-like eyes.

That was how they ended up snuggled next to each other on the bed, reading the diary Leo's sister had left behind. Leo clung tightly to Lille's side just as he used to with his sister. He probably missed her all the more dearly, reminiscing about the days they'd spent together.

Each entry was about either Leo or their family. She often wrote about how she hated making everyone worry, and that she herself was worried about Leo. Not once did she write about the pain her illness was causing her, nor any regrets about her future.

"Your sister was a strong girl, wasn't she? Kind, too."

"...Yeah," he agreed softly.

She had written in detail about the day Leo first used healing magic. She wrote that she was amazed that the chronic pain had suddenly faded but knew the illness itself hadn't been cured. She was afraid that if Leo kept trying to heal her, he would regret it one day and start blaming himself. She wanted him to know she was very happy, and to never forget that she loved and treasured Leo more than anyone else in the whole world.

"It says she wants me to become a proper sorcerer," Leo pointed out.

"You already are," Lille said, smiling gently. "You saved me, remember?"

"No, that was..." He paused, casting his eyes downward. "That was more for my own sake than for yours..."

Lille shook her head vehemently. "You still healed me, even though you were scared to."

"Well, yeah, but..." He chewed his lip.

"I think you're already doing everything your sister wanted for you. You're a wonderful sorcerer," Lille insisted.

"...I hope so," he murmured, putting his hand over hers. When she squeezed his palm in return, he glanced up at her with a look of surprise.

"Um... So..." he began awkwardly, a pink blush dusting his cheeks. "You said that you, uh...you saw my past?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"How much did you see?"

"Until Master Charlie came to pick you up," she recalled.

"So...you saw basically everything. You just had to see all the

worst parts of me, huh...?" He winced.

"I-I'm sorry," she apologized, remorseful that she'd invaded his privacy.

"No, I'm not angry. It's just..." he groaned, holding his head in his hands. "Lille, I..." He shifted on the bed until he sat facing her.

"That was the second time you've called me by my name," Lille said, beaming.

He blinked. "You heard me say it earlier?"

"I did."

"Sorry..." His eyes swept to the side guiltily. "I've been so rude to you this entire time. You're older than me, but I looked down on you."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I didn't particularly mind. Especially since you're a lot more knowledgeable than me," she said casually.

"...All right, then. Also..." he trailed off, his cheeks bright red. The air around him suddenly seemed to burn hot, too.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"I think... I think I like you," he mumbled bashfully.

"Really...? Thank you," she said, delighted. It honestly, truly made her happy to hear Leo express affection for her after months of cold, curt replies. However, the serious look in Leo's eyes was starting to make her question whether he meant "like" in the way she thought.

"I'm gonna try really hard to enroll in magic school next year. If I get in, would you go out with me?" he asked.

"Hm? Go out where?" She furrowed her brow.

"So, can I kiss you?" he blurted.

Lille didn't even know what he was talking about, never mind why it was a reason to kiss her.

"N-No!" she squeaked. She had a rather good idea of what a kiss was, and what it meant—but she wanted to make her first kiss special. She knew she wanted to save it for someone other than Leo.

"Why not? Do you hate me?" He pouted. When he darted forward with misty eyes, she automatically recoiled.

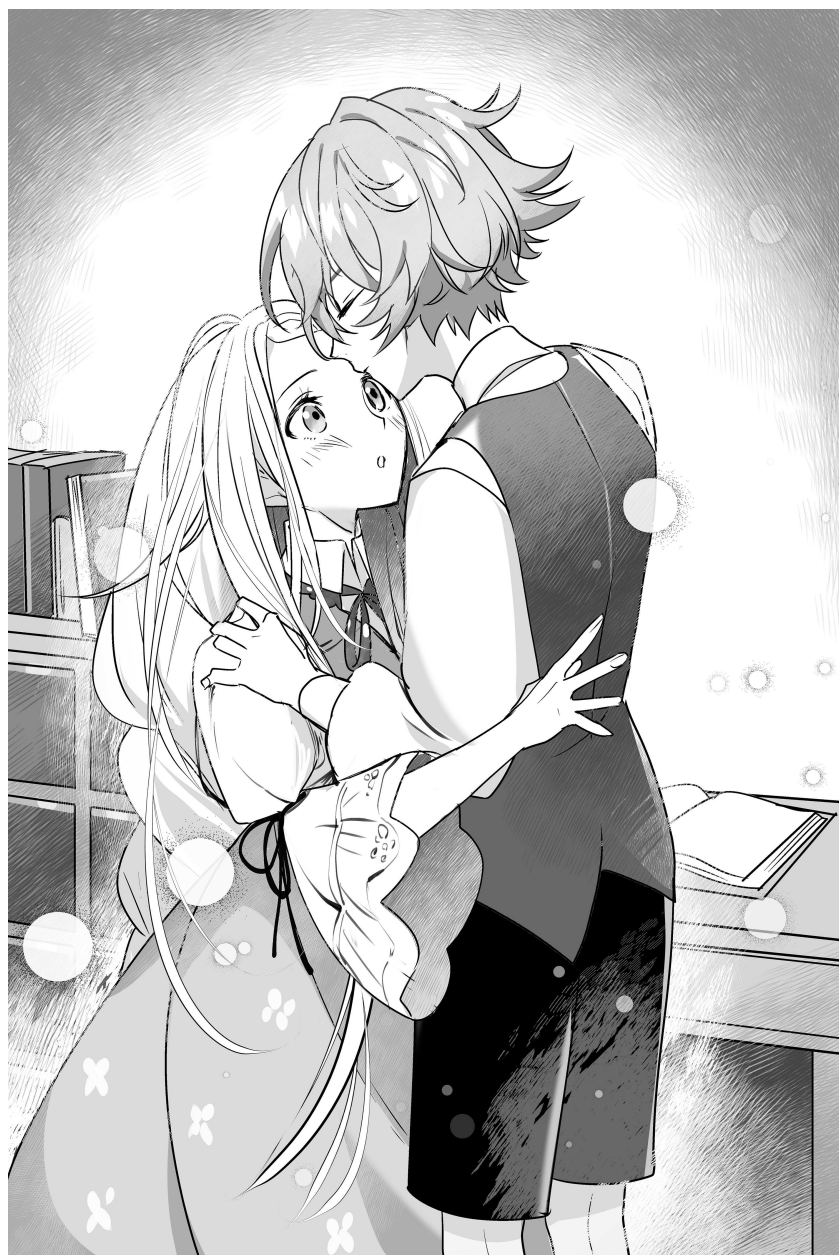
"Of course I don't hate you. It's just...you're family to me." She smiled apologetically.

"Are you saying you see me as a little brother or something?"

"Well, yes."

Leo's shoulders drooped dejectedly.

“Way to let someone down gently.” He rolled his eyes. “Still, I’m not gonna give up. I kinda thought you might say that, anyway.” Swiftly, he leaned further toward her, and pressed a quick kiss to Lille’s forehead.



“Leo—!”

“Come on, *surely* you can let me get away with that much. Families kiss each other’s foreheads all the time.”

Do they?

Sure enough, Lille had memories from when she was little of her mother kissing her before she went to sleep, but...in this case, it seemed more like Leo was using that fact as a clever excuse.

“All right! I’m gonna outdo myself this next year—just you watch!” Leo perked up. “I’ll study loads, and I’m gonna win you over! With us both living in the same house, I’ll have plenty of chances.”

A burst of energy seemed to overcome Leo, raising his spirits just as quickly as they’d fallen. Lille was glad to see him feeling better, but for some reason it made her slightly uncomfortable to be told so bluntly she was the object of his affections.

And...why did I think of Master Charlie when Leo kissed me?

She had a feeling that once they got home, a new stage in their lives would commence. During their time away, Leo’s feelings toward her had changed; she was beginning to recognize what her own feelings were; and her powers had awakened. When fall came, the whole household would have to confront these developments and more.

After that, would they ever be able to go back to the way things were?

With so much change yet to come, early adulthood carried with it the same bittersweet taste as the arrival of fall.

Chapter 7: The Day She Realized

“WELCOME back, you two. Did you have fun?”

When Lille and Leo returned from visiting his family, Charles and Ark greeted them at the door. Seeing them in the flesh, Lille realized just how much she'd missed them. The familiar smell of the house welcomed her back, and it began to sink in that, finally, she had somewhere she could truly call home.

“We did, thank you. Leo's mom gave me this scarf, too,” she said, fiddling with its ends happily.

After her conversation with Leo, they had shown the diary to his mother and father. They were overjoyed to see Leo restored to his former self, and then they told Lille all sorts of stories about their late daughter. They seemed more than happy to talk about her; evidently, they had been avoiding the subject so as not to upset Leo.

Lille asked how Charles had known to come find him, but Leo said he showed up at their house before the academy had even given him an official warning. At that time, Charles was already living in the depths of the forest. Why did Charles care about Leo in the first place? Why had he gotten involved? The sequence of events surrounding Charles's arrival was certainly bizarre.

Either way, Leo's non-magic parents had no way of stopping their son, so they were extremely grateful to Charles for stepping in before the state magic asylum or police got involved. Like Lille had heard Leo's older sister say in her visions of the past, Leo was the only sorcerer in their family.

Shortly before they left Leo's house, his mother wrapped a scarf around Lille's neck. Apparently it had belonged to his older sister. It was made of unbleached cotton, and intricate lace embellished the edges of the fabric. Leo's mother said she hadn't been able to throw out any of her daughter's belongings, but thought it would be nice to pass them on to other people.

Lille queried whether it was really okay to take something so precious to them, but, with glistening eyes and bright smiles, they

told her to consider it a gift from Leo's sister—because Lille had ensured her dying wish came to pass. That was all it took for Lille's vision to blur as well, and she tearily promised to visit again next year.

"They took great care of you, huh? I'll have to write them a thank you letter," Charles said, nodding to himself.

"What's gotten into Leo? He's been all fidgety ever since he walked in," Ark observed suspiciously. Usually, Leo would have made at least one snarky comment by then, but he was being uncharacteristically quiet, opening his mouth to speak only to snap it shut again.

"O-Oh, right. Well, uh..." He stumbled over his words, cheeks turning beet red as he turned to look at Charles and Ark. "I...fell in love with Lille, and...she's gonna date me if I get into magic school next year."

"What?!" Charles and Ark exclaimed simultaneously, their eyes wide in shock. In sync, they turned their heads to look at Lille for confirmation.

"N-No, I never agreed to that!" she denied, shaking her head vehemently.

"Well, yeah, it's what *I'm* planning. She might have turned me down this time, but I'm gonna ask her out again once I start school," he declared.

"Sh-She turned you down...?!" Charles gasped. For some reason, he looked even more rattled by the fact than Leo had been.

"Yeah. I did kiss her, though," he added nonchalantly.

"Ki—?!" Charles flailed. His face turned bright red, and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Atta boy, Leo!" Ark whooped in admiration.

"It was only my forehead!" Lille protested. "It's normal for families to kiss each other like that! Leo said so, too! Right?"

"Huh? Did I?" he said, avoiding eye contact.

He did. He most definitely did. That's the only reason I didn't tell him off before.

If he kept on making such wild claims in front of everyone, Lille doubted that any of them would be able to resume their old routines and relationships.

"Apologize. Now. We're apprentices! We're supposed to act responsibly!" she shouted, balling her hands into fists. "Promise you won't make any more trouble for Master Charlie! If you don't, I

won't talk to you anymore!" She glared at him.

Time seemed to slow. No one moved, and Lille's heavy breathing was the only noise filling the silence.

"...She got mad," Leo commented unhelpfully.

"Isn't this the first time? Whoa," Ark whistled. "Leo, you oughta say sorry *right now*. Girls can be scary when they're mad."

"S-Sorry..." he squeaked, eyes shining in fear.

Lille sighed. She was being childish. When she was little, she had thrown tantrums and argued with her little brother in the exact same way.

"I... I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have been so angry with you," she said, ashamed. "But I really would appreciate it if you could just treat me like normal." She hated that it felt like Leo had suddenly turned into a boy she didn't know.

"All right," he conceded. "Sorry for not realizing you're not used to that stuff."

"I-It's okay."

Having said that, it wasn't a matter of being used to it or not; she didn't want that sort of attention from him either way. Still, it seemed like Leo would respect her wishes. That was good enough for now.

"You young'uns should wipe the slate clean. Come on, forgive and forget," Ark prompted.

"We don't need *you* to tell us that," Leo huffed.

"I gotta say, you sure have grown. Not so long ago, you blew up at her for every single thing," Ark recalled.

"C'mon, please don't bring that up now. I already regret it."

"In any case, I bet Master Charlie's happy to see his two apprentices getting along," Ark chuckled.

"...Y-Yeah, I am. Yeah. It's better than fighting, anyway," Charles replied awkwardly, his cheeks still slightly pink. That he wouldn't meet Lille's eyes was beginning to upset her, so she assertively thrust a textbook in his face.

"Master Charlie," she said firmly. "Thank you for letting me borrow this."

"Oh, no problem. You don't have to give it back if you haven't finished it yet, though. Or...did you read it all already?" he asked, examining the book.

"I didn't exactly mean to. I had nothing else to do, so..." She shrugged.

She had read the book from cover to cover, but found no more information on the sorcery war than what Leo had already told her. It was odd that the author didn't go into more detail, considering the war was supposed to be such a significant historical event.

"I thought I told you to rest." He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Leo intervened before he could lecture her. "Don't get mad, Master Charlie. She did lots of other stuff, too. She played with my little sister, helped my mom do some shopping...*and* she rested a lot."

"I'm not mad," he told Leo, shaking his head. "I was just surprised she finished it so quickly." He turned to face her. "Lille, that's great. I really didn't expect you to read the whole book. It's admirable that you're working so hard, but today, you *will* take the day off."

"Okay..."

Charles patted the crown of her head. Her efforts to impress him had been half successful, half useless. What Charles really wanted was for her to take some time off. Lille, on the other hand, didn't care that she had less downtime if it meant he would praise her for studying so well. They had both been expecting a different outcome, and Lille was frustrated that she hadn't fully understood Charles's feelings.

"Oh, Leo!" she called, suddenly remembering. "We need to give Ark the meat your mom packed for him."

"Ack, you're right. It's gonna go bad soon otherwise." Leo grimaced. "Ark, we brought you a souvenir. My mom found some super good quality meat, so she cooked some for you."

"Your mom's a good'un. I've never even met her," Ark said, pleased.

"We used to have a pet canary, y'know? Mom loves birds." Leo grinned.

Ark glowered at him. "Leo... You didn't tell her I'm a pet bird, did you?"

"Give me some credit. I said you're Master Charlie's familiar. But...maybe she didn't really get it. We're not a very magical family, after all," he replied, shrugging.

"...Next time, make sure you clear things up," Ark said in a low tone.

As Leo and Ark headed toward the kitchen, Lille grabbed hold

of Charles's sleeve.

"Master Charlie, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure. Shall we go to your room?" he asked casually.

Lille didn't even have to explain; he could already tell she wanted to speak in private. For some reason, she was reluctant to let go, so she kept a tight grip on his sleeve as they walked to her room. He didn't comment on it, and simply looked down at her, sending a soft smile her way. Perhaps he assumed she'd been feeling homesick.

Charles shut the door behind them when they stepped into her room, and immediately turned to Lille with a look of concern in his eyes.

"Lille, did something happen at Leo's house? You keep looking at me like you're anxious about something."

"Huh? Really...?" She blinked. "Do you think Leo noticed?"

She had honestly believed she was succeeding at acting normally, but Charles had seen right through her. Or maybe she let her worry show precisely because she was with Charles.

"I don't think so. Why? Is it something you can't tell him?" He tilted his head.

"No, he already knows. It's just...if he realizes I'm anxious about it, he might blame himself."

"Don't worry, Lille. Everything's going to be fine," he assured her gently, bending down to her eye level. Although Lille had grown, Charles was tall and her height would never catch up to his.

She appreciated the way he always considered her—and not only the fact that she was smaller than he was, but also what things were like from her point of view, in general. After a single glance at his jade-green eyes, she felt like she could tell him anything and everything that had ever weighed on her mind.

"What happened?" he said quietly.

"Well..."

She sat on the edge of her bed and Charles sat facing her on a chair. Lille was unused to speaking for such an extended length of time, and she struggled to recount what had happened. At times, remembering what she had seen was painful, and she fell completely silent. Even so, Charles waited for her. He listened patiently and didn't rush her once.

"So, you saw the past..." he hummed sagely.

"You told me my magic wouldn't grow any stronger than I

wanted it to be. But, the thing is, this all happened because I wanted to know about Leo's past. So it listened to me, and..."

"Do you regret it?" Charles asked seriously.

Regret it? ...No, not at all.

She would never regret telling Leo his sister's last wishes. Having the power to see his past was what had made that possible.

"No, I don't," she replied firmly.

"Then, what are you scared of?"

"...Scared?" She furrowed her brow. Until he said the word, she hadn't recognized the emotion for what it was. She realized she was terrified of hurting someone—herself included—as a result of her magic growing stronger.

"What if I accidentally look at someone's past without their permission again? What if they don't want me to know? That's what scares me..." She frowned timidly.

"I don't think you need to worry about that," Charles said, rising to his feet to put a finger to Lille's pendant. "You said this stone got hot just before you saw the vision, right?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Magic stones have the power to lend stored energy to their owners, if the owner truly desires it. And more valuable stones are thought to have a particularly strong effect."

"Really?" she asked, marveling at the stone hanging from her neck. Perhaps that was why August had gone out of his way to present her with such a precious stone: he worried about her after seeing she couldn't control her magic very well.

"Yeah. And, most importantly, it won't lend you that power if it senses any doubt in your heart. So..." he said, a sympathetic smile on his lips, "if there's something deep within you that doesn't want to see it, your magic won't show it to you."

"But...what if I accidentally wish to see those things whether I want to or not?" she asked vaguely, pursing her lips.

What if, even just for a moment, she wished she could see the things Charles didn't want her to know about? And her magic rushed to fulfill that desire? It seemed entirely possible that she would one day peer into Charles's past—into his heart—instantly and inadvertently.

"I think you should trust yourself more. I've never met someone who's as considerate as you are; it's unlikely you'll read anyone's thoughts by accident. You've kept good control of it thus

far, right?” he said reassuringly.

Yet, Lille couldn’t trust herself the way Charles trusted her. Why? Because her magic wasn’t fully developed yet? No—it was because she could sense her feelings toward Charles rapidly changing, and she was scared it was just a matter of time until she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from prying into his past.

But she couldn’t tell him *that*.

“I know your mind’s racing. But, whenever you’re worried about something, you can always speak to me, all right? If we tackle things bit by bit, you’ll definitely regain your confidence,” he suggested.

She nodded. “Okay.”

“At Leo’s house, you lost consciousness from his mana flowing out of control, *and* had the help of the diary, the room itself, and the stone’s power. Basically, your magic awakened after a series of coincidences. It’s unlikely that’ll happen again. Plus, I’ll keep an eye on you, so don’t feel like you need to worry so much. Okay?” he said softly, giving her a smile of encouragement.

“Okay... Thank you.”

“Good. I need to have a talk with Leo, too. It sounds like he’s finally interested in going to magic school,” he chuckled.

In the vision she had seen, Charles said Leo would be his apprentice until he was allowed to enroll in magic school again. Even so, she imagined Charles would be sad if Leo really did move out.

“Oh, wait. Lille, I forgot to say something important,” he said, pausing in the doorway and looking over his shoulder. “Thank you for saving Leo. Your power’s the reason he’s able to move forward again.”

“...You’re more than welcome.”

With those words, Lille was saved as well—though Charles probably didn’t realize it.



THAT evening, they ate a much more modest meal than usual. Leo’s mother had sent along some bread and an apple *clafoutis*, as well as some grilled chicken. They simply covered the chicken in tomato sauce, and dinner was served.

"It's been rather chilly recently, hasn't it? Before we start lessons again, let's make a trip to town. We can close the shop for tomorrow and leave in the morning," Charles proposed.

"Yup, I guess it is pretty cold. But what's that got to do with going into town?" Ark asked, cocking his head.

"Lille needs some winter clothes, remember? Actually, I bet Leo will need some new ones, too. He's grown since last year," Charles pointed out.

"Oh, right. I forgot humans have to buy new clothes."

"You're lucky to have feathers. I'm jealous." Charles grinned. "I'll be visiting Master August, so I'd appreciate it if you could keep Leo and Lille company while I'm there."

"We don't need him to watch over us! I can protect Lille all by myself, y'know. That way, things won't turn sour like they did last time you took her." Leo pouted, neatly scooping up tomato sauce with his spoon.

"Leo. I get that you want to be alone with Lille, but some stores won't sell anything to kids without an adult present. You might not be able to buy those custard pies you love so much. Is that really okay with you?" Charles smirked.

"Huh? Seriously?" He wrinkled his nose and fell silent, closing his eyes as if he were making a very important decision. Lille fidgeted awkwardly; it felt like he was comparing her to custard pies.

"Fine. Ark can come, too. I want Lille to be able to eat the sweets she likes, after all," he said with a shrug. That meant she'd won against the pies...right? Though, in all honesty, she had mixed feelings either way.

"It's been quite a while since I've seen the seamstress at The Three Needles," Lille mused. "Would you mind if I took some potpourri for her, Master Charlie? The one she has is probably starting to lose its smell."

"Ah, I remember. She bought some from us about half a year ago, right? Sure, you can take a replacement. Maybe we should throw in some Warming Tea, too. I'm sure she'll appreciate it once the weather turns even colder."

He was talking about their new tea, a blend of medicinal herbs and ginger. They had perfected it just before Lille went to visit Leo's family. They wanted to be well-prepared for the cruel blizzards of midwinter, as well as to help customers who also struggled with the

cold.

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” she said.

Roughly half a year earlier, Lille had stood in a tailor’s shop on the verge of tears, thinking she wasn’t worthy of such beautiful clothing. Every day since then, she wore the clothes the seamstress had made her. Somehow, the seamstress seemed to have been able to visualize how she would grow.

“I know—let’s all sample some of the new tea to celebrate completing it. I’ll fetch the teapot!” Lille sang.

She hoped her new appearance would meet the seamstress’s expectations when they met again. What would the seamstress say when she saw Lille? With so much more life experience under her belt, maybe she would understand all of Lille’s feelings without explanation.

A mix of excitement and nerves bundled together in her chest as she watched the water boil, her eyes trained on the air bubbling to the surface.



“**ARK!** The custard pie stall’s also got some meat pies on special offer!”

“Ark, where was that store with the jars of hard candy? I finished eating the ones we bought last time, so I’d like to get some more.”

“There’s a huge line outside that fresh juice stall! It’s gotta be good! Hey, can we get in line, too?”

Ark trudged wearily behind Lille and Leo on the way to The Three Needles, the two of them dragging him to each stall lining the road.

“Two kids sure are noisy business... I really feel for parents with young kids,” he sighed.

“Are you okay, Ark?” Lille hung behind to check on him.

“Yup, I’m good. You seem quieter than earlier, though. Did you wear yourself out?” he asked.

“I’m so full that I’m starting to get sleepy...” she admitted.

“I gotcha. Leo, I’m going to sit on this bench with Lille for a bit. Could you wait in line by yourself?” Ark sat heavily on a bench at the edge of the road and pressed a few coins into Leo’s palm.

“Oh, and get a cup of juice for each of us!”

“Okay!”

Enthusiastically, Leo sprinted away, then screeched to a halt at the end of the line. He stood there, restlessly, and the way he craned his neck from side to side to try to get a look at the staff squeezing the fruit was adorable.

“Here, Lille. Take a seat. We’re in the shade here, so you can rest to your heart’s content. If you’re worried about getting your clothes dirty, you can sit on this,” he offered, unwinding the scarf around his neck and laying it out on the bench for her.

“Th-Thank you,” she replied, lowering herself onto it.

She wondered where Ark had learned how to be such a gentleman. Was social etiquette common knowledge in the bird world, too?

“Ark,” she began, slightly bashful. “What did that shop assistant give you earlier?”

When Ark had bought the meat pies, Lille happened to see the young woman minding the stall gazing longingly at him before tucking a piece of paper into his hands. Ark’s human form was rather handsome, so it wasn’t unusual to see people turn their heads to look at him, but Lille had never seen anyone give him something before.

“Hm?” He thought for a second and the memory dawned on him. “Oh, you mean this?” he said, casually pulling a slip of paper from his pocket. He smoothed out the creases where it had been crumpled.

“...Looks like it’s a note for me. She’s written a time and the name of a restaurant down, so I’d say it’s an invitation,” he remarked.

“Huh? An invitation?” Lille’s eyebrows shot up. “Will you go?”

“Hmm. She seemed to be in good health, and her hair was pretty glossy. She had a good amount of meat on her, too. I mean, I wouldn’t complain about spending the night with her,” he concluded.

“O-Oh, I see...” she replied stiffly.

Although Ark’s criteria for attractive women seemed a little strange, that wasn’t what had Lille at such a loss.

Spending the night...

In other words, neither of them was looking for a long-term relationship. She’d read about adults engaging in those sorts of

casual relations in books, but seeing one unfold right in front of her was different. For some reason, her heart was pounding—even though she wasn't the one who'd been invited.

"Lille? You seem sorta rattled." Ark furrowed his brow, peering at her in concern. "Unless it's just my imagination..."

"N-No, you're right. I was just surprised that you know so much about the human world."

"I've been around for a long time, you know. Maybe even longer than the Grand Master." He puffed out his chest.

"That's true, but...that's not really what I meant," she said, embarrassed.

"Ah, sorry. I guess that stuff's a bit too much for a kid to take in," he said apologetically.

"Umm... I suppose that's part of it, but it's more like..."

She struggled to find the right words. Until then, she had thought of Ark as someone who transcended human customs. Contemplating the idea of him dating or having flings with human women, however, she was hit with a harsh realization.

"If Leo goes off to magic school and you get married, the house will feel very empty," she said quietly.

For a moment, Ark's face dropped, turning serious—and then a hearty guffaw escaped him. "You're a funny one," he chortled. "I'm not going anywhere."

"But, what *if*?" she pressed. That afternoon he might only be fooling around, but it was possible he would meet someone he truly adored one day.

"Hmm. *If* I wanted to marry someone, I'd look for a bird willing to become Master Charlie's familiar as well. Then we'd live together as mates," he supposed.

Mates. Lille had heard the term before; it was how people referred to animals who were lifelong partners. Even if Ark found a bird who wanted to be his partner, he wouldn't leave Lille or Charles. In fact, the house would likely grow livelier, with another addition to the family.

However, there was still one thing Lille couldn't quite get her head around.

"Um... Can I ask you something?" she hesitated, and Ark waited for her to continue. "Do you prefer human women or...bird women?"

"So long as we have around the same level of intelligence,

what species she is doesn't matter to me. Still, a guy's got his preferences. I don't really have a type when it comes to human women, but for birds, I can be awfully picky," he explained.

"W-Wow..."

"If you're really that interested, I'm happy to tell you more, but I can see Leo heading back this way. We'd better leave it for next time. The boy can be pretty sensitive about this stuff, so let's keep that letter between us, all right?" he said in a hushed tone.

"Of course." She nodded.

Leo jogged up to them, holding three cups between both hands, full to the brim with juice.

"I got them! All right—orange, apple, or grape?" he asked cheerfully. The tip of his nose was stained orange from the droplets of juice that had flown out of the cups as he ran.

"I'm happy with anything. You choose first, Leo," Ark replied.

"I'll go with orange, then. How about you, Lille?" He spun toward her.

"I'll have apple, please," she said, and Leo handed the cup to her. "Thank you for standing in line, Leo."

"C'mon, it's not like I did anything special." He shrugged, but his cheeks turned deep red, and he swiftly turned away, staring vaguely into the distance. She was used to the way he deflected any sort of praise, and strangely, it calmed her to know that particular habit of his hadn't changed.

"Nope, she's right. You're a real gentleman now," Ark added with a smirk.

"Can it! I know you're just teasing me!" Leo barked.

He tried to swat away Ark's hand when it reached out to ruffle his hair, but Ark was faster. The way they goofed around really did make them look like father and son. As Lille watched them scuffle, a thought occurred to her.

Soon their family wouldn't be the same anymore. Leo would go to magic school next year, and the one hit the hardest by that loss wouldn't be Lille, but Charles.



"MY, oh my...! Lille, you've grown so much!"

The seamstress from The Three Needles looked Lille up and

down with tears in her eyes, seeing her for the first time in six months.

“Goodness. You’re a fine young lady, through and through! I expected a bright future for you, but you’ve gone above and beyond!” she said, beaming.

“Thank you very much,” Lille replied brightly, fighting back tears herself. It was difficult to keep her emotions in check on the receiving end of such high praise.

“How can you boys just stand there with blank looks on your faces? You’re useless! You should compliment her more!” The seamstress clicked her tongue. While she and Lille were having their heartfelt reunion, Leo and Ark had just stared, bewildered. Leo jumped out of his skin when the seamstress pointed in his direction.

“H-Huh? Well, we see her every day, so...” he stuttered.

Ark grinned. “Good point,” he agreed. “Lille, you’ve been working really hard, haven’t you? Look at how much you’ve grown! Magnificent!”

“Hey, Ark!” Leo snapped. “That’s not fair!”

The seamstress appeared confused by their exchange, and flashed Lille a puzzled look. When Lille simply gave her an awkward smile in return, she giggled under her breath.

“Anyway, you’re here for Lille and Leo’s winter clothes, aren’t you? I’ll take Lille’s measurements first. This way, dear,” she said, guiding Lille to the small fitting room. Meanwhile, another seamstress sat Ark and Leo down on the sofa and brought them some tea.

“Sorry to rush you in here without even offering you some tea,” the seamstress apologized.

“No, it’s quite all right. I’m full, anyway,” Lille replied.

“Oh dear! I don’t think it’s very wise to eat and drink a lot just before getting your measurements taken...” She frowned.

Lille winced. “Oh. You’re right. I’m sorry...”

“No harm done. I’ll just keep that in mind while I’m measuring.” She smiled. “In my case, my belly sticks out whether I’ve eaten or not!” She chuckled, patting her stomach.

Lille couldn’t help but laugh as well, though she felt a little guilty about it. Then, with a mischievous smile, the seamstress leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

“But, I *knew* it. The moment I saw you, I could tell,” she said rather cryptically. “I *had* to bring you straight in here. I need to

know what happened..."

Lille blinked. "What are you talking about?"

Even if they spoke at a regular volume, no one would be able to hear what they were saying from outside the room. Yet, the seamstress was whispering, as though sharing some sort of big secret. Was she talking about something private?

"You know! That thing I told you last time!" She grinned. "The fastest way for a girl to become a woman is to fall in love, remember?"

Actually, Lille did have a faint recollection of the seamstress saying that. Back then, however, falling in love was something that only existed in fairy tales, so she had quickly forgotten about it.

"Yes, I remember," she said hesitantly. "...What about it?"

"So...you found someone you're interested in, didn't you? It's as clear as day!" the seamstress exclaimed.

"I...found someone...?" she repeated blankly.

"I mean, you've grown, and your curves have filled out, but... how should I say this? There's something strangely enchanting about you. ...You have this dazzling feminine allure," the seamstress determined. "Those passionate eyes of yours could only belong to a girl in love. That's how I knew," she said resolutely, scrutinizing Lille's face.

Astonished, Lille felt a torrent of emotion tear through her body like a hurricane. She couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Don't tell me...you hadn't even realized it yourself?" The seamstress gazed at her with concern and placed a comforting hand on Lille's back.

"I...I'm...in love...?" she asked herself, trembling. "I...I think I am. How did I never realize...? I've loved him ever since we first met, but for some reason, it never occurred to me that..."

Tears began to cascade down her cheeks, and there was nothing she could do to stop them. She recalled the ache in her chest on the day they met, the night she couldn't sleep after he caught her in his arms, and her discomfort the time Leo kissed her—all of it evidence that she was in love with Charles.

"It's not either of the boys with you here today, is it? It seems like Leo's very fond of *you*, but...would I be right to assume it's Master Charlie?" the seamstress guessed.

Lille sobbed, her tears burning hot against her skin. She nodded.

"But... But I can't. I can't fall in love with him. He's family," she sniveled.

If both Leo and Ark went away one day, then Lille would be the only one left. And if she stopped thinking of Charles as family, he would lose all of them. He would be all alone.

"Master Charlie wants a family. I'm the same, so I understand his feelings completely. That's why I have to make sure everything stays the same..." Lille blubbered.

"Nothing has to *change*, you know. Can't you just tell him your feelings and leave it at that?" the seamstress suggested.

"But, he's too kind. As soon as he knows my feelings, I don't think he'll see me as family anymore. Then, he'll do his best to make sure I don't realize..." Her bottom lip quivered.

The seamstress sighed. "I desperately want to say that's not true, but I can't deny that you know him better than I do..."

Lille wiped away her tears with the palms of her hands; there were too many to catch with her fingertips.

"Most people's first loves end in heartbreak, but seeing how much he means to you, I really do wish I could help. I don't want to pry, though..."

"Thank you, but I'll be okay. I'll find a way to make some good memories out of it instead," Lille vowed.

So long as she put up with the pain in her chest and worked to get rid of her feelings, everyone would be happy. That was fine with her. To burden Charles with her own emotions was the last thing she wanted.

The seamstress peered into Lille's eyes with a serious look on her face. Eventually, she opened her lips, and murmured quietly, "...Though, there is a way to fall in love *and* be a family."

"Huh?" Lille looked at her blankly.

A light knock at the door interrupted them.

"Lille, can I come in? I'm opening the door!" Leo called, tumbling into the room before she even had a chance to reply.

"Guess what? The chocolates they gave us with our tea are so good. Lille, you've got to try these—" He stopped midsentence when he saw Lille's red eyes and lowered the box of chocolates he had just tried to thrust into her hands. "Wait, have you been crying?"

"Oh, don't worry, dear. She got a bug in her eye, that's all," the seamstress replied for her, knowing Lille wasn't in a state to

explain the tears away herself.

“A bug? Are you okay?” Leo’s brow furrowed. “Should I ask Ark to get rid of it?”

“There’s no need! Besides, what are you doing in the ladies’ fitting room, young man? Away with you!”

“W-Whoa!”

The seamstress ushered Leo out of the room, then slammed the door shut behind him.

“Goodness! You’re lucky he came in before we had you stripped down to your chemise,” she tutted.

“...I agree,” Lille said sheepishly. The seamstress let out a roar of laughter, and Lille found a smile on her own face, too.

“He’s going to get his heart broken, but to be honest, I think he’ll grow to be more handsome that way.”

“Really?” Lille tilted her head in curiosity.

“Indeed. That’s what happens with young boys. His love for you will become a stepping stone to greener pastures,” she pronounced wisely with a waggle of her finger.

She went on to tell Lille a funny story about a younger man who tried to woo her in the past. In the end, she finished taking her measurements without another word about Charles.

The seamstress gave Lille a hot towel to pat her face with, so by the time it was Leo’s turn to be measured, the redness around her eyes had subsided enough that nobody would ask any questions. She was grateful for that, but had hoped to ask for more advice about Charles.

Before they left, she gave the seamstress the potpourri and tea they had brought. Lille realized after the fact that she could have pretended to forget—that way, she would have had an excuse to see the seamstress again.



SEVERAL days later, a large package from The Three Needles arrived at their front door. Lille unpacked a long-sleeved dress made of thick fabric, a winter negligée, a gown, and a coat. The coat was a deep, green color, and had both a cape and hood sewn into it. It looked like it would complement her bright green dress quite well.

“Ark, how does this look? Am I wearing it right?” she asked, twirling from left to right and twisting her neck over her shoulder to get a better look at it.

It was nighttime, and she was modeling her new clothes. Ark had happened to enter her room just as she shrugged on the coat. She was eager to try everything on as soon as possible. Each time she slipped her arms through the sleeves of a new article of clothing, her spirits rose higher and higher.

“Very nice. Both the color and the design look great,” Ark approved, flying in circles around her. “Aren’t you hot, though?”

“I suppose it is still a little too warm to wear it. I’m really looking forward to wearing it in the winter, though. Does it get very cold here?” she wondered.

“The snow can pile up pretty high. You might already be used to that from your own country, though.”

“Snow, huh...?” she remarked absently.

One year, she had seen heavy snowflakes from the window of her tower. It was a strange substance: although it looked fluffy and warm, she knew it was cold to the touch. Yet, even when she tried to stretch her arm out the window, she never managed to actually touch it. All she could do was listen to the children playing in it outside.

“I hope we get lots. I was always jealous of the people I heard enjoying the snow. Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve been so excited for winter.” Lille smiled to herself.

She’d always known winter as a bitter, relentless season, during which she could do nothing but shiver in the corner of her bed and think about how hungry she was. In her new home it was different. She had a cozy house and could eat whenever she wanted. Furthermore, she had an incredibly warm family by her side. The cold was nothing to be afraid of anymore.

“We’ll need to clean out the fireplace before long,” Ark mused. “Winter’s pretty tough for me. I do a lot of wood-chopping, so I have to take human form more often than usual.”

“Can’t you just use magic to make the fire?” Lille asked, confused.

“Of course, you can use magic to light it, but when you need fire for a long period of time, you definitely need firewood to keep it going. It’s one of those cases where using magic would actually be more difficult,” he explained.

“That makes sense,” Lille agreed. She could see how it would be annoying to keep relighting it. Even after months of study, there were still many things she didn’t know about living as a sorcerer.

“Are you going to show Master Charlie your new coat?” Ark asked.

She froze. “Y-Yes, all right. Is he still in the living room? I’ll have a look.”

Since the onset of fall, Charles was away from home more often than usual. Sometimes, he claimed he was paying August a visit, but August never mentioned those alleged visits in letters to them. When Lille realized Charles was lying, she couldn’t help but wonder what he was doing, and where, although she had no intention of pressing him for answers.

Despite her love for Charles and their proximity, there was little Lille could do for him, other than make sure he ate a good, hearty meal when he was tired, and help out in the shop. Someday, perhaps, if she became a more knowledgeable sorcerer and more reliable adult, Charles would turn to her for help with whatever he was hiding. With that hope in her heart, she poured all her energy into learning as much as she could.

“Master Charlie? Are you in here?” she called from the hallway, popping her head through the doorway.

The living room was silent, but she could sense someone’s presence. Searching carefully, she finally spotted Charles dozing on the sofa. His arms and legs were strewn across it, peeking out from under his robe, and his expression was peaceful. Lille’s heart skipped a beat; it was rare to see him so unguarded.

I really shouldn’t wake him up.

But she was worried he’d catch a cold if he stayed so exposed. She tiptoed back to her room to fetch a blanket. Then, cautiously, she gently draped it over Charles’s sleeping form. She debated returning to her room and leaving him to rest, but she wanted to look at his serene face just a little longer. Slowly, she sat down in front of the sofa.

His eyelashes were long. His eyebrows were delicate curves. One section of long, golden hair was lying across his cheek. She wanted to brush it back, but didn’t have the courage to touch him. Not because he might wake up—but because she felt as though she would fall even deeper in love.

If she touched him, love would overflow from her fingertips in

a never-ending wave. He was important to her, so she could never let him know. She could never tell him, and she could never let it show in her body language. To Lille, Charles was sacrosanct: no matter how much she loved him, his heart would always remain out of reach.

“Mm...” An uncomfortable groan suddenly spilled from his lips. His breathing sped up until it came out in huffs, and his eyebrows knitted together in pain.

“Master Charlie...?” she said, concerned. It seemed like he was having a bad dream.

Should I wake him up?

“Lille...”

“Huh?” She paused. Charles reached out in his sleep, calling her name. Without thinking, she grabbed his outstretched hand.

“It’s okay, Master Ch—” she began, but was interrupted by a pained murmur.

“I’m sorry... Forgive me...”

It hurts. I can’t do this. Save me. I’m sorry. Please forgive me. This is my punishment.

Charles’s thoughts came surging into Lille’s head, though she hadn’t even tried to read his mind.

“No... Why...?”

She tried to stop, but she couldn’t. A hazy scene came to her—what Charles was dreaming about, most likely. Then, in her mind’s eye, she saw a room all too familiar to her.

The tower...? I can see myself...with Master Charlie? What is this...?

In his dream, her appearance was the same as it had been just before she started living at Charles’s house. They really *had* met each other before. Not only that, but recently, too. Why didn’t Lille remember?

She couldn’t hear what either of them were saying, but Charles’s feelings came through crystal clear.

“There was nothing I could do.”

With a despairing shout, the image of the memory scattered away, disappearing into nothing.

“...Lille?”

The hand gripping her own relaxed, and Charles wearily opened his eyes.

“Master Charlie...” she sighed, to which he replied with an

embarrassed, loose smile.

“Oh no... I guess I fell asleep here. Thank you for the blanke —” He turned to smile at her again, but froze when he got a proper look at her face. “L-Lille? Why’re you crying?”

“Huh...?” She blinked and touched her fingertips to her cheeks. Only then did she notice she really was crying. As though a dam inside her had burst, a constant stream of tears was rushing down her face with no end in sight.

Why does Charles have to suffer? Why does someone so kind and gentle have to be punished? Why can’t I do anything for him?

“Lille, are you all right? Are you in pain?” Charles asked, looking her up and down urgently. Watching his features contort in concern for her, a thought floated to the surface of Lille’s mind.

Even if it hurts me, I want to know the truth. I want to save him—whether he wants me to or not.

Chapter 8: The Truth

WINTER came.

Powdery, pure-white snow decorated the tips of the trees, and thanks to Ark, the hearth glowed warm with a roaring fire.

Leo received confirmation that he would be able to take the entrance exam for the academy next year. If he passed the exam, he would reclaim his eligibility to enroll in magic school, and thus Charles was constantly at his side, tutoring him closely. In the meantime, Lille's magic lessons had been put on hold.

Charles seldom had a moment to spare anymore. When he did, he usually went out, and even his visits to the magic item shop had grown increasingly rare. Lille wanted to sit down and have an actual conversation, but there was just no opportunity to catch him in the midst of his busy schedule.

Ever since the night Lille caught a glimpse of his dream, she had been stumped as to what to do. The chill of the season only intensified as time passed, but Lille was stuck, uncertain how to proceed. Meanwhile, Charles's complexion grew paler with each passing day, and Lille was absolutely powerless to help. Frustration gnawed at her from the inside out.

The atmosphere of the house became rather strained. Leo was concentrating on his studies, and Ark kept to himself, sensing that no one was in the mood to chat. With the arrival of winter, Lille had experienced all four seasons in her new home. Before long, she would welcome the new year, too.



“THERE’S a letter addressed to you from the Grand Master, Lille. It’s not often he writes to you specifically, huh?”

“Thank you, Ark.” Lille smiled, taking the letter from Ark’s hand.

It had arrived via teleportation in the mailbox just a moment beforehand. Lille’s name was written in August’s orderly script on

the front of the envelope. She suppressed the urge to read it immediately, tucking it into the front pocket of her apron.

"No problem. I'll be doing some dusting if you need me," Ark informed her.

"That'd be wonderful, thank you," Lille replied.

She frequently did the housework by herself of late, so Ark had decided to help out more. She wanted the house sparkling clean for the new year, and she had a lot of chores to get through that day. Ark was completing most of his tasks in human form. Usually, Lille enjoyed watching him try to air out the laundry as a bird, but he had decided the scale of their work warranted a larger body. There were a number of bookcases that never got cleaned properly due to their height (and Lille's lack thereof), making Ark's help a great asset.

"Now, where's the letter opener...?" Lille mumbled. It would be more convenient to use magic, but it was still difficult for Lille to adjust her powers to the appropriate degree when she cast such spells. She didn't want to rip the letter itself, after all.

Using the letter opener to carefully pry the envelope open, she slipped out the sheaves of parchment nestled inside, finding several pages. Cramped lines of August's handwriting filled each one.

"The snow must be rather heavy where you are by now. Are you all keeping well? I trust that none of you have come down with a cold."

With a single glance at the first few sentences, Lille could easily imagine August's tone of voice, and she giggled. It had recently become apparent that August was surprisingly loquacious when it came to writing. He seemed to take pleasure in composing long passages of text.

"Please make sure Charles doesn't leave his hair wet after taking a bath. Also, please tell him to drink something ginger-infused before bed. Due to his slovenly behavior, he's always been terribly disposed to catching colds."

Lille silently pledged to keep an eye on Charles. She knew he hated the taste of medicinal compounds, but perhaps she could convince him to drink some ginger and honey tea. She made a note to herself to brew some, starting that very night.

"I'll be present at Leo's entrance examination. I don't believe he'll have any trouble passing, but if he does exceptionally well, it may be possible to admit him to Year 3 immediately. So, please do tell him to make an effort."

If Leo had started magic school back when he was supposed to, he would've been a third-year student the following year. If he did well, he would be able to study with children his own age. Lille thought that for the best—then all the time and energy Charles had poured into Leo's lessons the past two years wouldn't go to waste.

"Apologies for the long introduction. Now, I'd like to turn my attention to the question you asked in your previous letter. First of all, given that you went out of your way to ask me, I assume Charles has yet to tell you of his own accord. And, I assume you haven't asked him out of consideration for his feelings. You're both as bad as the other, I must say. As Charles's apprentice, you must put to him anything weighing on your mind. A master is obligated to answer any question their apprentice may have. Do you understand? From now on, rather than coming to me, you shall ask Charles directly. He needs to understand his position as a teacher."

Her heart fell for a moment, and she worried her question had annoyed August, but it seemed he was more concerned about Charles than being pestered.

"In regards to the sorcery war, it happened just as you read in your textbook. You may be disappointed to hear that. As a matter of fact, nobody actually knows exactly how Charles stopped it. At that time, no one was aware a full-out war was in the cards. Of course, everyone knew our country was in a cold war with a neighboring magical nation, but that nation had shown no signs of commencing any physical attacks. In fact, within the nation itself, only a small fraction of the government was even aware escalation was being considered. Somehow, Charles caught wind of those talks, and decided to take it upon himself to discuss the situation with their officials. All by himself."

At that point, goosebumps formed on Lille's skin. Charles had done something even more dangerous than she'd envisioned. She was glad that, as a result of his actions, no one had died, but she shuddered to think that Charles himself could have died if he had put even one foot wrong.

"I don't know what he said, or how he was able to change their minds all by himself. I suppose he vowed not to tell anyone the details of what occurred between them. Thus, all we can be certain of is that—however it happened—Charles stopped a sorcery war before it even began."

Half of her could accept August's explanation, but the other half was struggling to come to terms with the difference between

her impression of Charles and his past actions. As Lille knew him, he was laid back, and didn't seem like the type of person to think about wars or politics. Yet, he had noticed the seeds of war being sown before anything came to pass. How? There must have been a reason for why he acted so rashly.

"I regret to say there's nothing more I can tell you. I do wonder, though, why Charles didn't tell you that much himself. Either way, he won't be reading this letter, so there's little point in lecturing him now. The next time I see him, I'll ensure he's very familiar with the roles he must fulfill as your master. Now, as for what you mentioned about Charles's recent behavior, I admit I am rather worried."

Her heart skipped a beat, and the paper quivered along with her trembling hands. The information to come was what she'd been waiting for.

"Are you completely certain he claims to visit my house when he goes on these outings? If so, I'm afraid to say he still only ever visits once a month, on the same day you go shopping in the town center. You mentioned that these trips of his are frequent, but I'm quite certain he has not even been in town. If he had, the gossip surrounding his presence would most likely have reached me. You know how he stands out. That means he's either doing a magnificent job of sneaking around, or he's visiting another country altogether. If he were normal, I would suspect him of sneaking out to meet a woman, but as he is, the suggestion is preposterous. I can safely say he would never do something so forward in a hundred years."

Lille was right. He wasn't visiting August's house at all. She'd already had an inkling that was the case, but she hadn't considered the possibility he was meeting with a woman. Even Ark had admirers, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that Charles might, too. He was a wonderful person, after all. If that ever happened, Lille would definitely have some conflicted feelings to sort out, but August's certainty to the contrary was reassuring.

"Charles has a tendency to be stubborn, so even if you ask him about this matter, I expect he'll try to dodge the question. Therefore, I will look into it for you. For now, just concentrate on yourself. It's a master's duty to worry about their apprentice, not the other way around. Having said that, if he comes home late or doesn't take care of himself, please do give him a piece of your mind. If he looks unwell, emphasize that it's inconsiderate to cause you to worry. That should bring him to his senses."

Lille was reminded of just how well August knew Charles. If Charles realized he was making others worry, he would most likely reassess his behavior. The weight on her shoulders lightened ever so slightly.

"If you're ever worried about something else, do not hesitate to send me another letter. I'll come to visit in the new year. I look forward to seeing you all again.

*Your grandfather,
August."*

His neat handwriting was just a little shaky where he signed his name.

"Master August..." she murmured, her voice full of emotion. He had probably signed the letter with "grandfather" to cheer her up.

Usually, when they received a letter from August, he addressed it to Charles. He often included a message for Lille, so she always read the letters as well, but this one was different. It was truly only meant for her. In fact, it was the first letter anyone had ever sent her. She planned to keep it somewhere safe, so she could reread it whenever she missed August.

I love you so much, Grandpa. Thank you.

Deep within her heart, she repeated the name she was too scared to call him over and over again.



"**WHAT** should we do about Master Charlie's room?" Ark asked as they took a break from their chores, sipping on some tea. They had finished the majority of the cleaning, save a few odd jobs.

"What? I thought we're not allowed to go in there..." Lille shuffled her feet awkwardly. "Besides, isn't his room locked?"

Like most days, Charles wasn't at home. Lille really did want to get the cleaning over and done with while she had Ark's help, especially since Charles's health would suffer if he was sleeping in a room full of dust.

"Say no more. Here you go." Ark grinned, throwing something in Lille's direction. She flailed in alarm but managed to catch it. It jingled in her hands, and she realized it was a small key.

"Ark, is this...?"

"The key to his room? Yup," he announced proudly, grinning with a glint in his eye. "I mean, he's not even here. He can't tell us what to do!"

"But...", Lille hesitated.

"Let's surprise him. We'll get it finished before he gets back," Ark schemed. "He's been really busy recently. Won't he sleep better with a clean room?"

"...I suppose you're right," Lille surrendered, her tone still a little nervous. "Okay. Let's do it."

She was reluctant to enter Charles's room without his permission, but with Ark's encouragement, her desire to give Charles a nice surprise won out. Charles always said not to clean his room because he wouldn't be able to find things, but so long as they didn't move anything that seemed important, there was no harm in tidying it up a little.

"Ark, where did you get this key? Did Charles give it to you?" she questioned.

"Nope. To tell you the truth, Charles is using the spare key—this one's the original. Charles lost it a while back, then I found it on one of the shelves. But it'd be no fun to just give it right back to him, so I decided to hide it. I'm pretty pleased it actually came in handy," Ark chuckled.

"Where did you hide it?" Lille asked curiously.

"In my nest. Haven't you seen it? It's under the roof," he said, gesturing.

Lille had never seen any birds in that nest, but when cleaning she made sure not to damage it just in case a type of migratory bird was using it. She never would have guessed it belonged to Ark.

"Do you sleep there?" she wondered.

"Nah, I just use it as somewhere to hide things. Didn't you know highly intelligent birds have a habit of collecting shiny things?" he asked.

When she thought about it, their supply of silverware had been dwindling. The key was made of brass, equally as shiny as one of the lost spoons. Did that mean Ark was responsible for most of the items that went missing in the house?

"...Ark, would you mind keeping your tableware collection a little smaller?" she hinted.

"Uh-oh, you got me. I'll try to hold back from now on, though," he said, grinning without a hint of remorse.

Lille could do nothing but shrug her shoulders at him defeatedly. They would be in a tight spot if all the metal utensils in the house disappeared, but she decided to overlook his avian habits for the time being. Ark's thievery had worked out in their best interests that day.

When Lille turned the key in the lock, the door inched open with a heavy creak. She had to keep reminding herself that she was only there to clean, feigning composure while her heart pounded at the thought of stepping into Charles's private space.

"W-We're coming in..." she announced to the empty bedroom.

Just one step inside the room, Lille felt her motivation swiftly subsiding. This was going to be an arduous task; mountains of books and parchment littered the floor.

She pushed through the towers of paper in her way and waded further into the room. The area around the bed was relatively tidy, but the desk was like a magical junkheap. Countless quills lay strewn across the surface. How could a man need so many quills when he only used one hand to write? Lille had to wonder why he had so many different inkwells lined up, too, each one tinted a questionable color. Perhaps each ink was imbued with a different kind of magic. Maybe.

The room was certainly disorganized, but Lille had to admit that being in it was very soothing: each and every item emanated Charles's presence. She was surrounded by the furniture he used and objects he was fond of. Until now, she had never even known what sort of books he liked to read.

She decided to start by changing the bedsheets. However, as she approached the bed, a pocket watch lying by the pillow caught her eye. Why would he leave it in such a strange place? Maybe he had forgotten to take it with him that morning.

She picked up the watch and turned it over in her hand. It was large, gold, and heavy. The second hand was decorated with stars, and the design very charming. The time was wrong, though, and knowing Charles, he might have left the watch behind because he couldn't be bothered to adjust it.

It was possible she was going too far, but Lille wanted to do everything she could to help Charles, regardless of how miniscule the help might be. But when she turned the crown at the side of the clock face, her vision suddenly began to swim and swirl.

"What...?" she gasped in bewilderment.

An incessant ticking noise echoed in her ears. She couldn't feel the floor beneath her feet anymore, as if she were dangling in midair.

"What...? What's happening...?" she panted breathlessly. The bed, the mountains of books, and the door all seemed to melt into one confused conglomeration of colors, stretching out and warping around her.

I don't like this. I'm scared.

A wave of nausea suddenly overcame her. Just as she clapped a hand over her mouth, her vision returned to normal. She swallowed the excess saliva in her mouth, and took deep, frantic breaths.

Thank goodness it's over.

Possibly, she'd simply had a dizzy spell. Something still didn't feel right, though, and she feared she was coming down with some sort of nasty illness.

Panicked, she rushed out of the room and came face-to-face with Ark.

"Oh, Ark..." she exhaled in relief.

"Whoa. Lille, why were you in there? Or should I say, *how* were you in there?" He furrowed his brow, genuinely perplexed.

"Huh? Well, you gave me the key, so I..."

"Uh, no... I was just about to give it to you. See?" he insisted, opening his hand to reveal the same key he had given Lille earlier.

"That's not possible," she said shakily. "I mean, I..." She dug her hands into the pocket of her apron. The key was no longer there.

"...How?" she asked sadly.

What on earth just happened?

Her legs gave out beneath her, and she almost tumbled to the floor.

"Hey, Lille! What's wrong? You're as white as a sheet," Ark said in concern, scrambling to support her, but his voice didn't register in Lille's brain. She had one theory—a theory so absurd, it wouldn't budge from her mind no matter how much she tried to deny it. Her lips began to move on their own.

"...Ark. You hid this key in your nest, didn't you?" Her voice shook.

"Wh—?! Lille... How did you know that?" Ark looked down at her in astonishment. It didn't seem like he was faking it. Which

meant...

"I turned back *time*...?"

"Lille?" Ark gave her a puzzled look. "Are you all right?"

Nausea overwhelmed her, and she felt her consciousness slowly slip away even as she desperately attempted to hold herself together.



WITH Ark's help, she stumbled to the living room and lay down on the sofa.

"Are you all right like this? You're covered in sweat... I'll bring you some water," Ark said, worried.

"Thank you, Ark..." she replied weakly.

Her head felt heavy with dizziness. She couldn't think straight. She tried to collect her thoughts, but the twisted view of Charles's room whirled around and around in her mind. She had to calm down. Firstly, she had to accept the fact that the pocket watch was a device used to turn back time. There was no other explanation.

She froze when she realized her apron pocket weighed more than usual. Slowly, she slid a hand over the front of it, and felt something round and hard beneath her fingertips. There was a chain-like clinking sound when she moved. Evidently, in her fright, she had tucked the pocket watch away in her apron.

Most likely, Charles had created the watch. But the ability to turn back time had never come up in her textbooks, nor had Charles ever mentioned it. She had never heard of a watch being used as a catalyst for magic, either. Despite the magnitude of his invention, Charles seemed to be keeping the watch secret.

Why? Perhaps he...

"Here's your water. Drink up, all right?" Ark said gently, propping her back up with his hand. She drank in little sips. By the time the cup was empty, both the nausea and lightheadedness had improved a little.

"Now, what's wrong? Did you just feel sick all of a sudden?"

"...Yes," she responded vaguely.

"You were saying something pretty odd back there, though. That got something to do with it?" he prompted.

"Well...", she hesitated. Ark looked deep into her eyes, waiting

for an answer. She found herself unable to return his gaze, and quickly turned away.

“Is it something you can’t tell me?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure... I’m sorry.” She hung her head.

“You don’t need to apologize. I bet it’s something to do with Master Charlie, right?” he guessed. She nodded, and he sighed, giving her a sad smile.

“I should’ve known. He’s the one at fault, sneaking around, keeping everything to himself... I mean, I’m his familiar! Surely I could help him somehow,” Ark grumbled, pouting.

“Exactly,” Lille agreed. “I’m his apprentice, yet he never asks me for help, either.”

“That’s just what he’s like,” Ark said, sighing again. “He can’t ask for help, so he just ends up doing everything by himself.”

Charles’s life would be so much easier if he just shared his burdens with them—and Ark wouldn’t be making the heart-wrenchingly lonely expression Lille saw on his face. Why did Charles try to face everything alone?

“Anyway...rest up for a bit, all right? I’ll finish the cleaning, and I’m sure Leo will be happy to start dinner preparations after he finishes studying,” Ark said kindly.

“Thank you. Do you think Master Charlie will be home late tonight, too?” she asked, her tone melancholic.

“There’s a snowstorm brewing, so he might actually come home early,” he mused. Lille looked forlornly out the window at the pure-white landscape. Then, as if on cue, the front door opened.

“I’m back!” Charles called from the entranceway. “*Eugh*, I’m completely covered in snow.” With a shiver, he brushed away the dusting of snowflakes sitting on top of his head and shoulders.

“Oh, um... H—” She opened her mouth to greet him, but the words caught in her throat. Her frantically beating, anxious heart was preventing her from talking normally. Ark, on the other hand, was totally silent, keeping a sharp eye on Charles.

“I guess Leo’s in his room studying. But, where’s Lille...?” he asked, scanning the living room. When his eyes fell on her, he gasped and immediately ran over to where she lay on the sofa.

“Lille, what happened? Are you sick? I thought Ark was acting weird, but...” he blurted in panic.

“I think you gotta consider your own actions a bit more,” Ark said to Charles, his tone cold. “I’ll go keep an eye on the shop, so

you two can have a nice, long talk.”

Charles fell speechless. He stood rooted to the spot, still wearing his snow-covered coat.

“Huh? Are you angry with me or something...?” he asked with a wince.

“Ask Lille,” Ark said. He shrugged derisively, avoiding contact with Charles as he passed by on his way to the covered pathway. He closed the door behind him with a slam.

“...Lille...” Charles kneeled down in front of her gingerly, his eyes murky with confusion. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

Ark had left them alone on purpose, and Charles’s face was just a few inches away from her own. It had been so long since they last properly spoke, and yet his kind voice was full of worry for her. Lille didn’t know what to do with herself. She felt like she might cry just from how gently he was treating her.

“I’m...fine, thank you,” she answered, her voice quivering.

“What happened? Your cheeks are awfully pale...” he fretted, reaching out to put the back of his hand to her forehead. She automatically shied away. “Lille...?” he asked brokenly, looking at her as though she’d physically hurt his outstretched hand.

“Oh, um...” she said, floundering. He’d misunderstood her reaction. He thought she didn’t want him to touch her, but she was jumpy due to their close proximity.

Abruptly, she attempted to stand up from the sofa. In her haste, the pocket watch fell from her apron. The high-pitched tinkle of metal against metal echoed through the living room.

“...Is that...?” Charles’s eyes shot wide open. As he scooped it up in his hands, he glanced between Lille and the watch with a look of utter disbelief. “Lille, did you...?”

After a moment’s hesitation, she slowly nodded. As she did, Charles’s expression changed. As though he were resolving himself to something, he closed his eyes, then gradually reopened them.

“So. You found out,” he said with a sad smile, holding back tears. His jade-green eyes looked more muted than ever. “Once you’re feeling better, come to my room. I’ll tell you everything.”



AFTER building up her confidence, Lille headed to Charles’s room.

It was already unlocked when she got there, and she opened the door to see Charles sitting on a chair.

"Hi." He greeted her in his usual, friendly tone of voice, turning his head in her direction, but tension hung heavy in the air. "I was waiting for you."

"Master Charlie..."

"I'm really sorry for worrying you today," he began. "No—you've been worried this whole time, haven't you? All because of me."

"Don't force yourself to talk about it if you don't want to," Lille said.

"No, it's fine. This is how things are supposed to go...this time," he added enigmatically.

The way he said it caught Lille's attention—as if he'd experienced numerous other sequences of events that didn't go as planned.

"To be honest, I'm still conflicted about whether telling you is the right thing to do or not. There are things that will be hard for you to hear, and you might wish I'd never shared them with you at all. You might end up being scared of me," he admitted, sorrow clear in his voice.

Lille walked closer, and just as he always did for her, she bent down in front of him until their eyes were level. Her gaze pinned him to the chair.

"No matter how painful it is, and no matter how I feel...a burden shared is a burden halved. It's far better than you carrying that weight all by yourself. I won't regret hearing it, and my feelings toward you will never change," she assured him firmly. "Ever since you saved my life, I've always..." She hesitated. "I've always been your apprentice."

"Lille..."

She had always wanted to know what lay behind those deep, jade-green eyes. She wanted to know how he managed to remain so tender while suffering so much. She wanted to pay him back—even if only a little—for everything he offered her out of the kindness of his heart.

The scariest memories were best faced together. If Charles's burden was too heavy, Lille was prepared to carry what she could for him. Being able to support him gave her life meaning.

"All right. Let me just take a few deep breaths. I'm the master

here; I should be the one dishing out words of wisdom, not my apprentice. I really am useless,” he sighed, patting another chair in front of him. It was the same design as the ones in the living room. “I brought in a chair for you, so make yourself comfortable. This’ll take a while to explain.”

“Okay.” She nodded, perching on the chair facing Charles. Despite what he said, relaxing didn’t feel appropriate; it wasn’t like he was going to tell her a fairy tale.

Then, looking straight at her, Charles cut to the chase.

“First, I’d like to clear something up. You used the watch, didn’t you? How did you get into my room?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

“Ark had the key you lost. He lent it to me so we could give your bedroom a thorough cleaning,” she explained. Thinking back, she felt guilty. Ultimately, Charles locked the room because he was hiding something, not because he was embarrassed by the mess.

“Ark, huh...? I suppose he thought I was up to something. That might be why he gave you the key,” he speculated.

Although it was hard to imagine, given Ark’s easygoing attitude, he was actually keenly perceptive. Not to mention, Charles and Ark had lived together for years and years, so it was possible Ark noticed things that went completely over her head.

“I think so, too. He seemed upset that you hadn’t told him anything,” Lille recalled.

“Don’t worry—I’ll tell him everything as well. As for Leo... Well, he’s at a crucial point in his academic career, so I’d rather he didn’t catch wind of this. It’s not really a story children should hear, anyway. I’ll have to tell Master August, though... He’ll bite my head off,” he said, shuddering.

“Leo isn’t as childlike as you think, Master Charlie. I agree that Master August will be furious, but...that’s only because you took so long to tell him.” Lille smiled apologetically.

For a moment, Charles simply blinked, but then cast his eyes down. “You’re right... I’ll tell both of them,” he replied, gazing at the pocket watch lying in his lap. He would have to tell them about the watch as well.

“When I saw it and realized the time was wrong, I tried to reset it. Then, when I turned it, I suddenly felt a strange sensation...” Lille recounted. “I ran into Ark again when I left the room, but he acted as if our conversation from a few moments

before then had never happened. That was when I realized it had to be something to do with time.”

“Ah... I feel awful for making you experience that horrible sensation. Still, it’s lucky you only went back a few minutes,” Charles noted. No doubt, if she had gone back several hours, she would have been even more shaken up. In the end, it was a good thing she had wound the crown so hesitantly.

“The watch turns back time, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed,” he confirmed with a nod. “The amount the user turns the crown determines how far back they go. Then time reverses to that point. You make it so nothing after that point ever happened. That means the user can do things all over again.”

“Is that how you managed to prevent the sorcery war?” Lille deduced.

“That’s right. Without this watch, I never could have stopped it. How much do you know about what I did?”

In all honesty, she knew very little. She had no theories on what Charles had been up to lately, either, nor did she know why he had been so distressed in that nightmare he’d had.

“Only that you knew about the sorcery war because you turned back time, and...,” she paused. She could be certain of only one other thing. What she had found out today fully dispelled all of her doubts. “...We really did meet before, didn’t we? In another time.”

“You worked that out too, huh?” The corners of his lips turned up slightly. “You really are an intelligent girl.” And yet, for some reason, he looked miserable as he spoke.

“When we first met, I felt as though I recognized you. Then, when you said we’d never met, I could tell you were lying. At first, I thought I’d simply forgotten ever meeting you, but I was wrong. It would’ve been impossible for me to remember something that effectively never happened,” she concluded.

“I have to say, I was surprised when you asked if we’d ever met before. It all made sense when I found out about your talent. If you have the power to see people’s pasts, of course your mana would be able to latch onto those moments lost in time,” Charles said softly.

When someone turned back time, the world after that point would cease to exist. Apparently, however, mana wasn’t affected by time in the same way. Mana stored all events, no matter whether

time was reversed or not. That natural property, paired with Lille's ability, was most likely what allowed her to see those events.

"There's something I need to apologize for," Lille began nervously. "When you were asleep on the sofa the other day, twisting and turning, I...I accidentally caught a glimpse of your dream. Both of us were in the tower together..."

"I remember you were crying when I woke up." Charles nodded. "...But, why?"

"Because your feelings were rushing through me..." She looked down, remorseful.

"*I'm sorry. Forgive me.*" That was what he said back then. Lille's chest grew tight at the memory, a cold sensation squeezing her heart.

"What did you mean by 'punishment?' What's been making you suffer so terribly?" she asked, the corners of her eyebrows tilted up in sympathy.

Silence.

The soft *tick, ticks* of the pocket watch were suddenly extremely loud in the absence of any other noise. Outside, a pile of snow fell from the roof with a *thwump*, and Charles finally opened his mouth to speak.

"Lille," he said with a certain resolve. "This country was once in ruin."

His declaration made no sense to her. "Huh...? What do you mean?" She furrowed her brow.

"Everyone died."

In the world Master Charlie saw, each and every citizen died? Leo and Master August, too?

"How... How did that happen?" Her bottom lip trembled. She balled her fists up between her knees to stop them from knocking together.

"With your talent and my powers, we just might be able to use the watch as a catalyst to project ourselves into those memories and view them together—just like you did at Leo's house," Charles suggested. He tightened his grip around the watch in his palm. The second hand seemed to tick with every beat of Lille's heart.

"If you're with me, I'll be able to dive into my own memories. You might see some terrible scenes. You'll probably want to cover your eyes, but...will you still come with me?" He looked at her with hesitant eyes.

“I will,” she replied resolutely. Fearless, she confidently placed her hand on top of Charles’s.

So long as I have you by my side, I could travel through any number of dreadful worlds. No matter what happens, I won’t let go of your hand.

Charles closed his eyes and started to chant a spell she had never heard before. An instant later, she felt her consciousness floating as if the ground had been snatched out from beneath her. A never-ending darkness engulfed her, yet within the nothingness, one sensation persisted: Charles’s hand anchoring them together, his warmth embracing her so as not to lose her.

Chapter 9: Charles's Memories

“...LLE. Lille!”

She could hear Charles's voice. She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids were so heavy they wouldn't move.

“Lille, wake up!”

The warmth she felt in her palm moved to her cheek.

“Lille, *please*. Open your eyes...” he pleaded, his breath cascading over her ear. With a jolt, Lille's eyes flew open. “Oh, thank goodness... If you hadn't woken up, I have no idea what I would've done.”

His face was startlingly close—close enough to count his golden eyelashes if she wanted to. His long, silky hair spilled over her like a flowing curtain.

“H-Huh?” she stuttered. Their unusual position smacked her dazed mind into clarity immediately. She felt something soft supporting her back. With a quick glance, Lille realized Charles was sitting on the ground and she was lying in his lap.

“M-Master Charlie, could you let go?” she asked, embarrassed.

She could tell that her body temperature was skyrocketing. It was probably heating even more rapidly than she could've managed using magic. The last thing she wanted was for Charles to notice her crimson-red cheeks, but she was as stiff as a board between his arms and chest. She couldn't move, no matter how much she wanted to.

“Oh...! Sorry. I couldn't just leave you lying on the floor, so I...”

“N-No, don't worry. Thank you very much,” she interjected earnestly. “I wasn't too heavy?”

“Not at all. I was shocked, actually. You're as light as a feather.” He smiled.

She was slightly unsteady on her feet, but with Charles's support, she was able to stand upright. Fortunately, she didn't feel nauseous like she had when she used the watch.

“Um... Where are we, Master Charlie?” she asked, peering at

their surroundings. The floor was made of hard, glossy stone, and huge, white pillars stood along the edges of the space. It appeared to be some sort of corridor.

“These are my memories. Right now, we’re in a passageway just outside the royal palace. I think I must’ve been a government official for quite some time at this point,” he explained.

One side of the passageway had no walls and looked out onto a courtyard. Some well-dressed, pretty ladies were engaged in pleasant conversation next to a fountain. Inside, people dressed in extravagant robes hurried down the corridor, shaded from the harsh light of the sun.

“This is the royal palace...?” Lille said in wonder.

The palace was where the nobility lived. She had thought it would be a place that shined and sparkled, but it looked more like they’d cultivated an environment where both night and day existed at the same time.

“Nobody else can see us—the same as when you dove into Leo’s memories. We can’t interact with anything in the world around us, though it does seem like we can touch each other,” Charles observed.

The people in the passageway continued to scurry along, taking absolutely no notice of the two of them standing in the middle of the hall. Experimentally, Lille tried sticking her arm out in front of someone, but sure enough, they passed straight through as if she were made of vapor.

“See?” Charles cocked his head with a smile.

“Yes, you’re right,” she agreed. She didn’t have to try touching Charles; she had felt him just a moment ago.

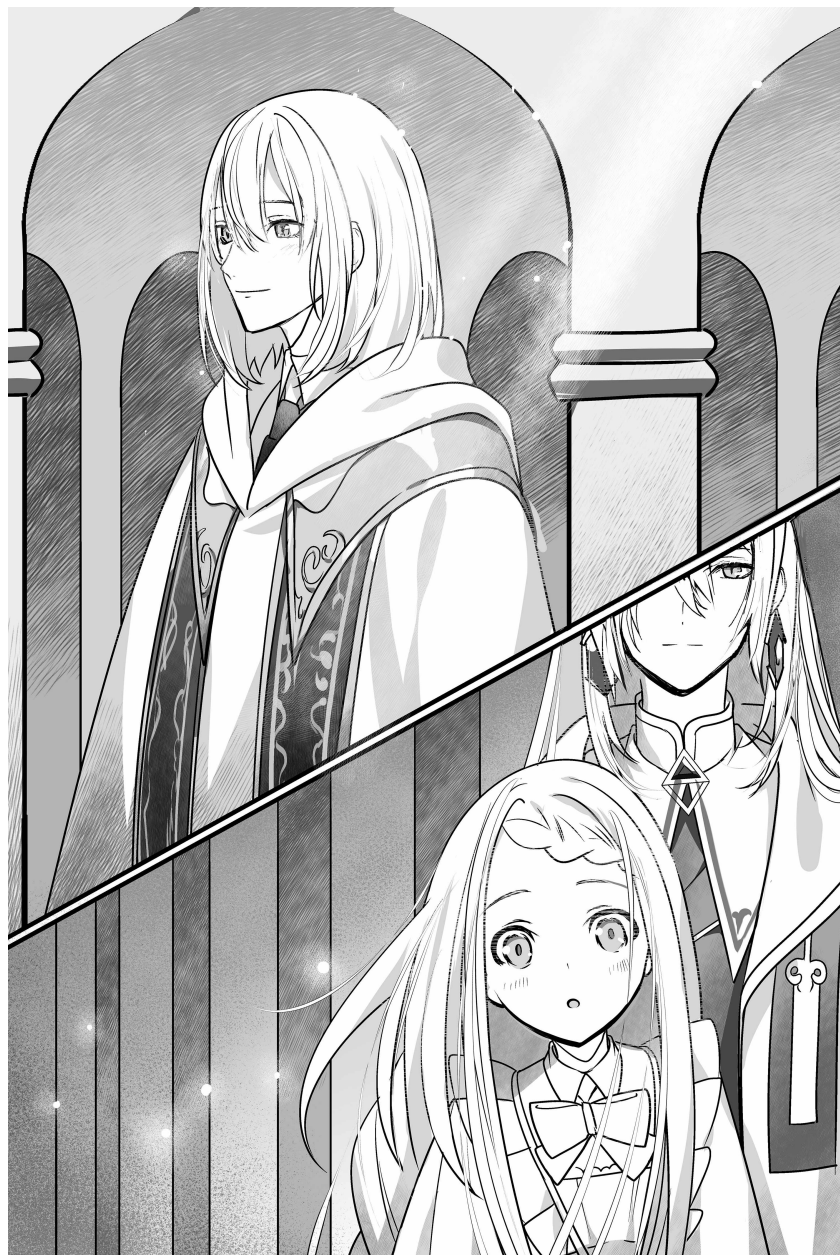
That warmth she had felt on her cheek while she was unconscious—had that been Charles’s hand? After rousing, her face had soon become so hot that the sensation of his warmth melted away.

“Look, Lille. Here I come—my past self,” he said, pointing.

Following the direction of his finger, Lille caught sight of another Charles, wearing the same decorative white robes as everyone else. He was younger and more slender than she knew him, but had retained both his meandering gait and the way he didn’t look where he was going. Or, perhaps it was more accurate to say that the Charles next to her still had the same habits.

The younger Charles’s hair was much shorter, barely grazing

the tops of his shoulders. Most different was his face, and how his eyes brimmed with curiosity. It was far removed from the calm, composed look Lille was used to from him. He beamed as though everything he saw was a joy to him, and he walked right past where Lille and Charles were standing with a spring in his step.



"This really takes me back. At this point, I was still enjoying work, and I had no worries to speak of... I really thought my life was on track," he said, laughing bitterly.

"I never knew you used to wear your hair so short," Lille commented.

"This was before I decided to grow it. It's kind of embarrassing." He smiled stiffly.

When Lille first arrived at Charles's house, he had told her he wore it long as a sort of petition to the gods. That meant the heart-wrenching, nightmarish events that had initially made him want to pray were yet to come. Lille had experienced some of the anguish they would go on to cause him when she caught a glimpse of his dream.

"Let's follow him." Charles gestured to his past self. "If I remember correctly, there was an important meeting today."

Younger Charles stepped through an imposing door into an even more imposing room. Trailing behind him, they entered the room to see a large, round table with a crowd of elderly people seated around it. A voice called out to the past Charles, and Lille turned her head to see August urging him to take the empty seat at his side.

"Master August hasn't changed a bit, has he?" Lille grinned.

"I don't think he's changed since I was a student, honestly. He's a man of many secrets..." Charles hummed.

After younger Charles claimed the last seat, the table was full. The man sitting in the most lavishly decorated chair then struck the table with a wooden gavel.

"That's the chairman," Charles said, leaning toward Lille. "He has the most authority in the government and is also the most influential sorcerer in the country."

With heavy tension in the air, the meeting began. Each official at the table sported a frown, their brows knitted, which signaled the gravity of their conversation. Even so, the words they spoke were complicated, and Lille couldn't understand what they were discussing.

"This was around the time we started to be suspicious of the other country's actions. Up until this point, it had been a cold war, so now we're talking about whether we should prepare to engage in combat in case they make any moves," Charles clarified, explaining

the meeting in a digestible summary, for which she was very thankful.

“...Charles,” the chairman suddenly called. Both younger Charles and the Charles next to her jumped out of their skins.

“Oh, I forgot he addresses me here. That gave me a shock,” Charles chuckled.

The past Charles stiffened at the chairman’s next words. Eventually, he replied, his expression tense.

“Understood.”

“He just nominated me commander of the magic artillery should war break out. The magic artillery is a troop of sorcerers who can use offensive magic,” Charles said carefully, casting a conflicted gaze at his younger self, who was hanging his head and had a scared look in his eyes.

“To tell the truth, even though I was anxious about being chosen, I didn’t really give it too much thought. We had more sorcerers than the enemy, and our military was stronger. If it ever came to war, I thought we would be able to gain the upper hand without risking anyone’s life. Oh, how wrong I was...” His gaze turned resentful as he kept his eyes trained on his past self.

“The meeting’s about to end. I think another memory will surface now. It’ll probably be...,” he hesitated, unsure how to describe it. “Lille. Are you prepared to see something terrible?”

“...Yes,” she assured him solemnly.

When they followed the past Charles back out through the same doorway they had entered through, an entirely different, gruesome scene unfolded before them. The air was permeated with the scent of blood.

“*Mmf...!*”

Bile rose high in Lille’s throat. Her tongue went numb, and she desperately attempted to choke back the urge to throw up—but to no avail. On her knees, her entire body convulsed as she retched over and over again. Even after she had nothing left in her stomach, the intense nausea wouldn’t leave her.

“Lille, are you okay?” Charles asked in worry, rubbing her back comfortingly.

“Y-Yes...” she replied, but she couldn’t catch her breath. Her vision flickered.

“Don’t force yourself, all right? I’m sorry for showing you something so horrifying. Do you want me to cover your eyes?” he

offered.

"No, it's fine. I'll look..." she panted.

Charles had no choice but to live through this reality, so Lille wanted to share that pain. She didn't care whether she vomited or fainted, she was determined to sear this image into her memory. After taking a moment to regain control of her breathing, she stood at Charles's side.

The area around them looked like a wasteland. Rubble was piled high where buildings had used to stand, and the ground was littered with unmoving, red-stained bodies.

"Where are we...?" she asked quietly.

"It may be hard to believe, but this is the town center, near the palace," Charles replied.

"No way..." she gasped.

In the middle of the carnage stood a younger Charles, his face and hair sticky with blood. Like a broken doll's, his face was deathly pale and devoid of expression.

"This can't be happening..." he croaked. Tears streamed from his dull, blank eyes. "Everyone's dead...and I'm the only one left..." He fell to his knees, not even bothering to wipe his tears as he stared into the distance. "I can't let this happen... Let me start over... Surely, I can fix this..."

He continued to mutter to himself as though he'd lost his mind. Then, with no warning, the scene froze, and a new world took its place before Lille realized what was happening.

"...Lille?" Charles checked her over with concerned eyes, perturbed by the way she stood so unsteadily.

"I'm all right..." she insisted. "Was what we just saw...the outcome of the sorcery war?"

Before them was a small room so dim they couldn't see where they stepped. A desk lamp was the only thing faintly illuminating the space, and they could see rolls of parchment and small mechanical parts heaped around it.

"...Indeed. This is the version of events that took place after I failed to stop the war. The magic artilleries of the two warring states clashed, and an enormous quantity of magic was expended all at once—on an unprecedented scale. What do you think happened then?" Charles asked.

Having seen the aftermath just moments ago, she could easily imagine. Lille couldn't bring herself to voice her theory, however,

shaking her head in silence instead.

“As a result of all the mana in the area being consumed all at once, the balance of nature collapsed, and the world itself began to engage in self-defense. Every single particle of mana ran wild, and both countries were annihilated in the end. Although the most powerful sorcerers were able to put up barriers to avoid the chaos, almost every ordinary civilian died...” he recalled, pain clear in his strained voice. “The land was no longer in a state where it would be possible to rebuild society.”

The words poured out of him as if he were confessing his sins, giving Lille no opportunity to remind him that he needn’t talk if it was too much.

“Despite our huge number, not a single one of us sorcerers ever even considered what would happen if that much magic was used all at once. Our arrogance got the best of us—myself included. Magic and mana weren’t created by mankind, nor do they belong to us. We’re simply borrowing something that has always existed. Using it to take someone’s life, or to force someone to keep living... It goes against the laws of nature. As a result of our ignorance, we made a mistake that could never be set right. And then thousands of innocent people paid the price,” he said, trembling.

Who decided that Master Charlie, the sorcerers, and the people who died deserved to be punished? Who decided who had to pay the price?

Even if the answer to those questions was “nature” or “mana,” it seemed like Charles would never truly be satisfied with that explanation.

“After that, I threw myself into research to create a watch that could turn back time. I’d had a vision for one since my student days, so I began to devote all my time to making it. I have no idea how many months or years it took. I never saw anyone, and I didn’t even know what was happening in the outside world. I was obsessed with finishing it; it was the only thing keeping me going.”

Another version of himself sat in front of the desk, looking exhausted and unkempt. His hair had grown wild, tangled so badly that it resembled a bird’s nest; he probably didn’t even remember the last time he’d washed it. His eyes were sunken and shadowed with dark, dark circles. Lille doubted anyone would have been able to recognize him.

Both his face and body were withering away, so thin that his

limbs were more akin to sticks—and yet, his eyes glowed with determination. He worked on his invention with immense concentration, although how he had the strength to sit upright was a complete mystery.

“...It’s done,” the Charles at the desk announced in disbelief, raising his head. The shine of obsession in his eyes was replaced by a glimmer of hope. “Now I can finally go back. I can save everyone. I can change the past, change our fates...!”

On his palm rested the same pocket watch that Lille clasped in her own hand.

“I’ll fix things. I’ll do it all again...however many times it takes,” he vowed, turning the crown of the watch. The room distorted before them, and yet another scene took its place—a time before the sorcery war began.



CHARLES used the watch again and again. Every time he failed, he wound it back, and time reversed. Scenes seemed to flash by faster than Lille could blink.

There were times that Charles failed during negotiations and almost got himself killed. Other times, even if negotiations succeeded, the enemy violated the treaty and attacked regardless. With each try, just as the obstacles in his way began to disappear, new problems backed him into a corner, each attempt ultimately leading to disaster. One step forward, one step back. At the cost of the heart of the man Lille loved, the same events repeated over and over again.



His loneliness must have been soul-crushing. He fell into despair countless times, yet stood back up again without fail. No one knew that a single sorcerer was changing the fate of the world all by himself. Apart from Charles—and Lille, who could witness those memories—not a single soul knew.

I'll commit everything I see today to memory. I won't let Charles bear his past alone.

Lille believed she had her own destiny, too. Ever since the day she met Ark—no, the day she was born—her mana had been guiding her to this moment. Everything led to her loving Charles, the man standing on the battlefield all alone.

When she reached out to intertwine her fingers with his, he looked at her in surprise. His eyes soon softened, however, and he responded in a whisper.

“...Thank you,” he breathed, squeezing her hand in return.

Gazing at his tearful eyes, it was everything Lille could do not to say “I love you.” Having seen the timelines that only Charles knew, she so desperately wished she could convey how much she loved him.

But she could never tell him. She could never let him find out...and keeping her secret would be far easier if only she could leave her feelings behind in the nonexistent worlds of the past.

“It's a good thing the watch reverses change to the body, too. If it didn't, I'd probably be an old man by now,” Charles remarked. Lille had long lost count of how many times she'd seen government negotiations play out by that point.

“This must be the final time,” Charles said.

The past Charles was kneeling in front of the leaders of the neighboring nation. From among the crowd of wary elders, one man suddenly came forward.

“No matter how many times I explained or tried to persuade them, they never changed their position. So, I let one of their leaders use the watch. I have no memory of doing it, but at this point, that man had listened to my plea twice. In my head, I was planning to let him use it, but I had no idea I'd already done so in the future,” Charles explained.

“I'll believe you,” the man said. Murmurs from the others filled the air, and in the midst of it all, Charles wept. His long, arduous battle had finally come to an end.

“Because he knew it was possible to turn back time, he believed me when I said a sorcery war would begin, and he believed me when I told him what would happen. Well—it’s more like he had no choice but to believe me after using the watch himself,” Charles said, melancholic. “I should’ve tried that method earlier, but I was terrified to let go of the watch for even a second. Because of my failures, everyone suffered countless times. I still see the town in ruins and people calling out for help in my dreams.”

The leaders of the neighboring country agreed to draw up a pact with Charles, vowing not to leak any information pertaining to the existence of the watch or the awful future that would have awaited them. It was a means of preventing panic among the general populace and conflict with people who’d want to steal the watch to use it for evil. Destined to never be recounted by any history textbook, the hero’s tale thus came to an end. Or, it should have.

“This isn’t the end, is it?” Lille asked aloud. Although Charles had regained his sense of hope, Lille’s vision didn’t feel as if it was coming to a close any time soon. And they still hadn’t seen how he met Lille.

“...No. If it’s okay, I’d like you to stay with me here a little longer,” Charles said softly.

They watched Charles resign as a government official and settle in the woods. In the same place he’d made the pocket watch, he built a new house, along with the magic item shop. Neither Ark nor Leo had met him yet, and he lived there alone.

At first, he did nothing but sit in a daze all day. However, slowly but surely, he started working on more magic items, and Lille shed a tear as she saw him recover the will to live. Observing him, she felt she was watching over some precious treasure.

As though a gust of wind had lifted the pages of a book, Charles’s lonely, relaxed lifestyle suddenly became increasingly hectic. He took Ark as his familiar, and Leo as his apprentice. He was able to save Leo before the academy released any official warnings because he used the watch. Only once, that time.

“The first time around, I was too late. Both Leo and his sister ended up in comas, doomed to sleep forever... Even if their bodies had decomposed, their souls would’ve continued to wander that plane of existence for an unthinkable length of time—Leo’s stuck in a whirlwind of solitude and regret, and his sister’s stuck in an

endless loop of suffering. I couldn't bear to see two young children meet such a cruel fate. Even if that's the price for committing a taboo practice, it's unreasonably coldhearted to have two children pay it..." Charles's lip quivered. "I used the watch again, even though I had promised myself I wouldn't anymore."

Charles's memories became more and more current, until eventually, they overtook the present that Lille knew. It was the near future, just after they welcomed the new year. Charles received a notice from August, and in his letter Lille caught sight of the name of her home country.

"Oh no..." the future Charles said, reading it. Judging by his expression, it contained bad news.

"...August wrote to me, telling me that a country that outlaws sorcery was planning to invade the magic nations," Charles said.

"What...?!" she yelped. Lille knew that her home country hated sorcerers, but not so much as to declare war. She had always assumed they were keeping her prisoner simply because they feared the unknown.

"They received worldwide criticism for human rights abuses against sorcerers, but still continue to persecute them. As there's no chance of a compromise with that country, our government drew up an agreement with neighboring nations to overpower them before the invasion took place," Charles said, summarizing the contents of the letter.

Had he been so busy because the same fate was still awaiting them? Was he trying to prevent war once again?

"I was worried about the sorcerer they had trapped in the tower—you, in other words. I thought it was likely they'd drag you into it, so I planned to get you out of there before that happened," he explained.

"You came for me..." she murmured.

She lamented the fact that though Charles had saved her, she couldn't remember a thing about it. His unconditional act of kindness felt bittersweet, and she was reminded yet again that she owed her life to Charles's protection.

"Thank you, Master Charlie," she said in earnest.

"...I don't deserve your thanks in the slightest. In the end, I..." he trailed off, making a pained face. "Never mind. You'll see for yourself soon enough."

He was likely referring to the reason he'd had to turn back

time again. The reason he'd so profusely apologized to Lille in his dream. Whatever the reason was, his sorrowful words and distressed eyes instantly told Lille that the memory she was about to see wasn't a happy one.

"Sorry... You must be scared," Charles said apologetically, meeting her eyes. It was possible Lille was about to see herself die. Even after seeing the countless victims of the sorcery war, she was so afraid that her hands were shaking.

"Will you keep holding my hand?" she asked tremulously. His touch would give her the strength to keep her eyes open until the very end. She couldn't let Charles shoulder his past alone—the past forgotten by everyone but him.

"Of course," he agreed firmly, squeezing Lille's hand even tighter. He hadn't let go of her once since they entered his memories—he had even placed his hand on her back when she was throwing up.

The past Charles—or should she say the future Charles? Either way, the Charles in the memory left for Lille's country as soon as he finished reading the letter. Teleportation magic could only be used if a sorcerer had previously visited the location, so he flew on Ark's back instead.

"That's why you could cast a magic circle leading to the tower, when Ark came to collect me," Lille realized.

"That's right. The first time, Ark complained the entire journey about having to fly across the ocean, so..." He chuckled. "When I cast the magic circle, he never asked why I'd been there before, though. Perhaps he already realized I was up to something, even back then."

The entrance to the tower appeared before them, the Charles in the memory standing nearby.

"Oh my. There are so many soldiers..." She winced. Lille only remembered there ever being one or two soldiers guarding the tower at once. In the vision of the future that once was, however, the grounds were crawling with them.

"I imagine they increased patrols in case any other countries launched a counterattack. Just now, my past self decided to cast an invisibility charm in order to sneak past them, since there's no way I would've been able to avoid killing anyone, faced with such a large number of enemies," Charles explained.

"I never knew there was a spell like that," Lille commented in

wonder.

“To tell you the truth, it’s a forbidden spell. Many people would use it for evil, no doubt, so the textbooks don’t teach it. I’d be arrested if I used it back at home. But, well, this was...an emergency, y’know?” His voice grew quieter, sheepish. He looked down guiltily as though he were a mischievous child being scolded. “You won’t tell Master August, will you? He’s strict about that sort of thing...” He bit his lip at the thought.

“I promise not to tell.” She smiled.

Although Charles said he’d turned invisible, Lille could still see him for some reason. Perhaps it was because the memory was from his point of view. While Ark waited outside, Lille watched Charles begin to climb the stairs up to the top of the tower. After using magic to unlock the sturdy, reinforced door, it swung back to reveal a terribly thin girl wearing a tattered dress. In that timeline, she didn’t even have a name.

Did I really look that awful...?

The Lille in the vision had no sense of caution, and simply stared vacantly at the stranger who had suddenly burst into her room.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name’s Charles. I’m a sorcerer, just like you,” he replied kindly.

“A...sorcerer?” She blinked.

“This’ll be a battlefield before long. I’m here to rescue you before that happens. Would you come with me?” He offered her a hand.

“But...if I go with you, it’d cause trouble for people,” she said—the exact same words she told Ark when he’d come to collect the current Lille.

Sadness briefly flared in Charles’s eyes, then he grinned, trying to comfort the other Lille. “Not at all. I’ll make sure it won’t,” he assured her. “Come on, we need to hurry.”

“All right.” She nodded, hesitantly latching onto Charles’s outstretched hand. Then, all of a sudden—

“INTRUDER! He’s on the enemy’s side!”

Soldiers spilled into the tiny room.

“Get behind me,” Charles directed calmly.

As the soldiers charged toward him with their swords poised, Charles shot off bolts of magic, stunning each of them one by one.

In the meantime, Lille quivered as she watched from behind Charles's back.

Eventually, all of the soldiers were flat on their faces, unmoving. But then the current Lille noticed a curious glint in one of the men's eyes.

He's only pretending to be unconscious...!

Despite knowing she couldn't touch anyone, Lille leapt forward with her hand outstretched and screamed at their alternate selves. The soldier waited until Charles and Lille had resumed talking, then dove between the two of them.

"Watch out!"

For a moment, Lille wondered if she had yelled without thinking again, but quickly realized the voice belonged to her alternate self. The other Lille dashed out in front of Charles in order to defend him, and at the same time, he shot off a blast of magic to divert the course of the oncoming sword. Instead of stabbing anyone, the blade merely cut off a chunk of Lille's hair, the strands fluttering to the floor.

One side of her long, disheveled hair was now short. She froze, opening and closing her mouth like a fish. The current Lille gasped as well, looking on in shock.

"Oh... Oh no... My hair..." the other Lille breathed, horrified.

Her knees started to knock together as tremors chased up and down her whole body. Lille had fully believed in the lie she'd been fed—that if she cut her hair, her magic would go berserk. Even after learning the truth, the idea still scared her enough that she couldn't gather the courage to cut it.

"Hey... What's wr—" Charles said, approaching the girl.

"They said I could never cut it, or else..." she shrieked.

As soon as Charles anchored his hands on her shoulders, her mana ran completely wild. Jade-green flashes of light accompanied a huge shockwave, the pulse totally filling the small room. Charles was almost thrust into the air, but luckily he was able to cast a barrier around himself just as he lost his footing.

The ground beneath them shook with the impact. Stones clattered down from the ceiling, and the walls of the tower began to crumble.

"*Gh...*!" Charles grit his teeth, rushing over to take Lille in his arms and cast a teleportation spell. They both disappeared, then reappeared outside the tower.

"Are you still with me?!" Charles shouted desperately, shaking her limp body, but...her eyes were utterly devoid of light. When Charles registered what that meant, his bottom lip began to tremble.

"No... You can't..." he whimpered.

Lille's eyes stared into empty space. Her chest was unmoving. Her arms and legs lolled.

Oh. I really did die.

She had been expecting it, but her vision turned cloudy, and her body ran cold nonetheless.

"Again. It happened again. I let someone die. She tried to protect me, and... Is it all my fault?" he choked.

Lille desperately wanted to tell him "No, it's not your fault at all," but her voice would never reach the Charles in the vision. Instead, what spilled from her lips was a question.

"Master Charlie..." she began in a whisper. "I thought that threat about not cutting my hair was just a superstition. Was I wrong...?"

Leo—a sorcerer—had suggested cutting her hair when they first met without thinking anything of it, and she'd never seen the phenomenon mentioned in any of the books she'd read.

"...No, you're right. I suppose it's technically true that there's magic stored in a sorcerer's hair, but it still shouldn't go out of control if you cut it," Charles said.

"Then, why did I...?" She frowned.

"In this timeline, you still fully believed that something terrible would happen if you cut it. Your mana ran wild because you panicked when you saw how much the soldier cut off. Then, in the midst of the chaos, you released every single mana particle inside you, and..." he trailed off sadly.

"So...it happened...because I thought it would..." She nibbled at her lip.

It suddenly struck her that the reason the thought of cutting her hair still made her so anxious was due to remnant memories of the future that wasn't there anymore.

"I'll go back... I need to save this girl..." Charles muttered to himself, twisting the crown of the pocket watch with trembling fingertips. Beneath her own fingers, Lille could feel the current Charles's hand shaking slightly as well.

"I'm so sorry, Lille. You died because of me," he apologized

dolefully.

“It’s not your f—”

Before she could finish speaking, the scene before them contorted, and the outlines of their own bodies began to fade away.

“...Looks like this is where the memories end,” Charles said. His voice was echoey and far away as if it were dissipating, too. As Lille looked up at him, his translucent lips moved; they seemed to say “Sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

Her consciousness waned, just as it had when they first entered the world of memories. Within the pitch-black darkness, she could’ve sworn she heard Charles sobbing in the distance. She frantically searched for his warmth and found it. She wrapped her arms around the quaking, curled-up body and bundled it against her chest.

I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here. I won’t leave you behind ever again.

She didn’t know whether she said the words aloud, nor whether Charles could hear them. Still, she closed her eyes and prayed that when they returned to the real world, he at least wouldn’t be trembling anymore.

Chapter 10: Family Forever

“...LLE. Lille!”

Through a haze, she could hear Charles’s voice somewhere in the distance. The words were the same she’d heard when she woke up in Charles’s memories. She weakly opened her eyes, but her vision was blurry, almost as if it was shrouded in white mist.

“Are you all right, Lille?”

His voice sounded closer, and she was beginning to regain sensation in her body as well. For a moment, she worried she was sleeping on Charles’s lap again, but the fluffy, supportive surface beneath her was far more likely to be a bed.

“Master...Charlie...” she called, her voice hoarse. Her throat tingled immediately, and a dry cough escaped her. With no hesitation, Charles rubbed a soothing hand in circles on her back and put a glass of water to her lips. She gratefully sipped it.

“Thank...you,” she croaked. As her eyes finally came into focus, she looked around to find herself in her own room. Charles had probably carried her there.

“Thank goodness... I bet you were exhausted. You’ve been asleep for quite a while,” Charles said, sighing with relief.

“Oh, really?” she asked, stretching out her stiff limbs.

Looking out the window, she could see the sun setting. She didn’t know how the passage of time in the visions corresponded to time in the outside world, but judging by the severe look of concern on Charles’s face, she supposed she’d been sleeping for at least a few hours.

“It’s dinnertime now. Do you feel like eating? If you don’t feel strong enough to move, I’ll bring it to you here,” Charles offered kindly.

“No, it’s quite all right. I can move,” she insisted.

“Are you sure...? Don’t push yourself, okay?” He eyed her, uncertain, but let her stand up all the same.

When she reached the living room, an unexpected scene awaited her: Leo was sitting patiently on one of the chairs, Ark

towered over him in his human form, and—for some reason—August was there, too.

“M-Master August? What might you be here for?” She blinked in surprise. Apparently, Charles hadn’t been aware of August’s presence, either, because he yelped and jumped out of his skin at the sight of him.

All three of them were frowning bitterly, and August even had his arms crossed.

“I called him here,” Ark announced.

“Why?”

“Well, because it seems like Master Charlie has something important to tell us. I filled Leo in on what’s been happening, too,” he clarified. Lille then understood why they all looked so serious. She suspected, though, that it would be even harder for Charles to share what he’d gone through amidst such a negative atmosphere.

“W-Wait, why’d you d-do that?” Charles stuttered.

“If I didn’t, you’d say you’re not mentally prepared to talk about it and keep on putting it off ’til later. You know you would,” Ark said bluntly.

“I wouldn’t—”

“You most definitely would, Charles. Steel yourself and sit down,” August interrupted, gesturing to the chair firmly.

Lille could understand the logic behind Ark’s strategy, but having just seen everything Charles had experienced, she felt a little sorry for him. “I know you can do this, Master Charlie. I’ll fill in any parts you find hard to talk about,” she promised.

“Lille...” he said tearily. Their eyes met; he was clearly touched.

Suddenly, a giant sigh from Leo drew their attention. Up until that point, he had simply listened silently.

“Can’t this wait a moment? Lille’s *famished*. Pot-au-feu is one of my specialties, but it’s not gonna taste of anything if you eat it with a frown,” he huffed dramatically. His unusually theatrical declaration was most likely a way to distract everyone—for Charles’s sake.

“...Yes, you’re right, Leo. Thank you.” She smiled pleasantly.

“It’s just, I went to all the trouble to make it, so...” He fidgeted. “I just want you to actually enjoy it.”

Lille merely looked at Leo, a grin on her face. He swiftly averted his eyes with an exasperated snort, his cheeks dyed red.



AFTER dinner, Charles finally recounted his arduous journey to everyone else. At times, his voice caught in his throat, and Lille stepped in to tell the story for him. August raised and lowered his eyebrows at critical moments, the color drained from Leo's face, and Ark kept opening his mouth as if he wanted to say something. Yet, in the end, no one dared interject. They listened to Charles's experiences all the way through, silently reflecting on what they heard.

"...And then, Lille and I dived into my own memories together, and saw everything I just told you about. And, here we are now..." Charles concluded with a huge, long sigh of relief.

For a while, no one spoke.

"U-Um, Master Charlie was—" Lille started to say, unable to bear the silence. But, as soon as she began to talk, she was interrupted by August's harsh voice.

"You fool!" he shouted, fists coming down on the table. Everyone—not just Charles—flinched at his sudden outburst. "Why didn't you inform me?! You should have come to me the very first time you used that watch!"

"Well, you died in the sorcery war, remember? How could I tell you something like tha—"

"How *dare* you underestimate me. Ever since I took you in, I've made plenty of preparations in the case that I die! Would a man who wrote a will years ago really be hesitant to talk about death? Don't be ridiculous. Your stupidity never fails to amaze me, son..." he growled, his eyes swimming with tears. He steeped his hands in front of his face so as to hide the fact, but Lille could tell he was trying to wipe his eyes with the sleeves of his robe.

"Master August..." Charles said apologetically.

"Hey, Master Charlie. Were you avoiding telling me because you didn't want me to hear about the war? Or was it because you couldn't talk about me going into a vegetative state?" Leo asked curiously. Charles's expression clouded over in response. He had been keeping an eye on Leo the entire time he was talking.

"...Both, I suppose," he answered eventually.

Leo breathed a drawn-out sigh. "To be honest, I was scared when you talked about how many people died, as well as how I ended up, but...*you* had to see those things over and over again all

by yourself, didn't you? Ever since the day you made me your apprentice, I decided I'd have your back no matter what happens, y'know," Leo said seriously.

"Leo..."

"Also, Lille saw herself die, right? And she's still here. As your top apprentice, I'm not gonna lose my nerve now," Leo assured him.

"I always thought you acted like such a little kid, Leo. But I guess you grew into a fine young man while I wasn't looking." Ark grinned, ruffling Leo's hair.

"...Are you trying to be nice? With you, it always feels like you're just saying it to poke fun at me," Leo accused.

"C'mon, I don't do that," Ark said. "I see you still need to learn how to take a compliment." Ark looked over at Charles again, and his grin relaxed into a wide smile. His eyes were full of emotion, as if he were silently thanking Charles for telling them what was going on.

"Ark... You noticed, didn't you?" Charles guessed. "That I was turning back time."

"Yup. The first time I noticed something was off was when you took Leo in. It's like...it was too much of a coincidence that you found him before the government *or* the academy caught wind of what he was doing. Not to mention, you used teleportation magic when we saved Lille from the tower. After you did that, I had a few theories floating around my mind," Ark confirmed. Both Lille and Charles gazed at him in astonishment; he had realized very early on indeed.

"That long ago...? You really are quite perceptive..." Charles marveled.

Ark puffed out his chest. "Didn't you know? Familiars can sense their masters' emotions—to a certain extent, anyway."

"Wait, really?" Charles asked, genuinely surprised. Even Master August had a look of shock on his face.

"Though that only goes for familiars with a great deal of magical power, apparently. That's how I knew Master Charlie was having nightmares every night," he explained.

"You should've told me earlier... I feel like an idiot for trying so hard to hide it," Charles said, his shoulders drooping dejectedly.

"I could say the same thing. However, it's common practice among familiars not to tell our masters about that sorta stuff, since it might bother them. So I'd appreciate it if you could all just forget

I ever said anything,” Ark said stiffly.

August nodded with a sage hum of acknowledgement. “... That’s a rather significant revelation, I have to say. I believe such information deserves to be studied, but...if you insist, I am willing to keep quiet,” he conceded.

“Thanks a bunch.” Ark nodded to him.

August wore a somewhat disappointed expression, but he seemed like the type of person to keep his word under any circumstances.

“At least Master Charlie has less to worry about now,” Ark added cheerily.

“That’s true,” Charles replied. “Now I just have to tell you about...,” he trailed off, struggling to tackle the matter head on.

August picked the sentence up where he left off. “Lille’s home country, no? I suppose you’ve been away from home in order to travel there.”

“...That’s right.”

“No wonder I never heard a thing about his whereabouts,” August commented, stroking his beard. Lille thought back to August’s letter, in which he’d suggested that Charles was *“either doing a magnificent job of sneaking around, or visiting another country altogether.”* He had been precisely on the mark.

“I dressed up as a traveling bard and tried to convince their leaders that no good would come of invading the magic nations, but they weren’t having it. They’re entirely convinced that they won’t ever lose to a magic artillery with the scale of their weapons,” Charles sighed.

“To be frank, this isn’t a matter of military strength. I believe we can bring things under our control without anyone on our side getting hurt, but the enemy won’t get off so lightly. Of course, we can do our best to reason with them, and hold back, but it’s entirely possible that a considerable number of people will die,” August said with a hard stare.

“But I thought you just wanted to save Lille. She’s safe now, so what’s the point of trying to save their people?” Leo piped up.

“Well...,” Charles hesitated.

It was a good point; Lille thought that was a little strange, too. Charles had no ties to her country, and he had terrible memories of being in danger there. Unlike before, it would be impossible to end the conflict with no casualties. Lille wondered if Charles hoped to

avoid any death because of the catastrophic trauma he had regarding war, but the reason that came out of his mouth was one she could have never anticipated.

"If Lille's family is still alive, they might get caught up in the chaos. If that news reached Lille, she'd be heartbroken..." he murmured, his eyes sorrowful.

Lille's heart pounded, almost as if it were punctuating the fact that it wasn't broken yet. "You're doing it...for me...?" she asked in disbelief.

Why? How?

How could he still only think of others after everything he'd been through? How could he bear to keep suffering? Whether he saved people or not, no one would recognize his actions. No one would ever return the favor, so why did he keep sacrificing himself?

"Why...Why are you so kind?" she choked, the words thick in her throat.

"Lille...?"

Her eyes stung. She bit her lip in an attempt to stave off the urge to cry, but hot tears spilled through her eyelashes nonetheless. Like a toddler having a tantrum, she drummed her fists on Charles's chest in frustration.

"You only ever think of others, and...you shoulder everything yourself..." she sobbed. "But I can't...pay you back for what you did for me...!"

Charles stared down at her, utterly bewildered. He held both of his hands in the air awkwardly, unsure if he should try to soothe her, or simply take her blows in silence.

August coughed pointedly. "O-Oh dear, Charles. I have to say, I'm not impressed. Making young ladies cry is not what I expected of you. We will excuse ourselves, so you two can have a nice, long chat to talk it out," he declared.

Ark patted Leo on the back. "Agreed. Let's go, Leo."

"Wh-What? Why me? I wanna stay with Lille!" he protested.

"Just do it, all right? The three of us have things to discuss in your room," Ark said.

"Ugh... Why in *my* room...?" Leo complained.

Ark's hands clamped down on Leo's shoulders, steering him out of the room as he grumbled. August, meanwhile, cheerfully picked up the wine bottle and his glass to take with him.

Once the door to Leo's room shut with a *slam*, the living room

grew quiet. The only sound echoing in the stillness was Lille's sniffles, and a sudden embarrassment overcame her.

"...Lille. I'm sorry for making you cry," Charles apologized.

"No, it's not your fault..." she said tearily.

Although pain was obvious on his own face, Charles still did all he could to consider Lille's feelings. He was so caught up on the times he couldn't save people that it was almost like he forgot he *had* saved them. No one remembered the anguish of the other timelines, yet Charles seemed to be shouldering it on their behalves regardless.

"Please understand that it wasn't your fault I died. You saved me... You saved me so many times, so..." she hiccupped. "Stop apologizing. Don't say it's your fault..."

There were only two things that Lille, Leo, Ark, and August wanted to tell him. The first was that they were sorry for making him suffer all by himself. And the second was...

"Thank you so much. When I think of how you saved me, all I feel is gratitude. Nothing else!" she told him confidently.

Thank you for saving us. Thank you for fighting for us all those years to make sure we were all safe in the end.

Charles swallowed hard and his face scrunched up.

"Sorry," he whispered as if he were talking to himself. At the same time, he drew Lille toward him. She blinked, opening her eyes to see his protruding collarbone right in front of her. He had his arms wrapped firmly around her head and shoulders; she couldn't move an inch.

"Master Charlie..." she breathed. He was hugging her—far tighter than when she fell in the forest, or when he congratulated her at her hat ceremony.

"Sorry, just...don't look at my face right now. Can we stay like this for a bit?" he requested, his voice thick. Lille wondered if he could feel her tears dripping against his neck. Given a safe place to cry, he wept, his tears soon flooding out in full force.

"Sorry, Lille...and thank you."

Ever since she arrived at Charles's house, Lille had questioned why she'd been born with magic, and what her purpose in life as a sorcerer was. She finally felt like she had her answer.

I must have been born with magic in order to save Master Charlie. Or, that's how I feel, at least. I hope it's not too selfish of me.

When Charles released Lille, she looked up to see his cheeks

beet red. With shaking hands, Lille made them some tea, and they both stiffly walked over to sit on the sofa. Even after Charles finished his tea, he held the cup in the air with an iron grip, his elbow fixed in place.

“Umm... Master Charlie. Would you like another cup of tea?” Lille asked hesitantly.

“O-Oh, no. I’m all right. Sorry for spacing out,” he replied awkwardly.

“No, don’t worry about that...”

“Also, I’m sorry for being so pathetic,” he added with a forced laugh.

“You’re not pathetic,” Lille countered.

She gently took the cup from Charles’s hand and placed it on the table. As she watched him sigh with relief, she noticed the tips of his ears were still dusted pink. Perhaps it was embarrassing for him to cry in front of someone else, especially as an adult.

“Master Charlie...? Can I ask you something?” Lille piped up.

“Go ahead.”

“About my home country... What will you do?” she asked, nervous.

Charles knitted his fingers together in front of his forehead, resting it against his hands in silence. After a few tense minutes of deep thought, he raised his head again. He looked conflicted, and his tone was apprehensive as he started to speak.

“...Lille. If you feel at all resentful toward your country, then I won’t do anything. But if you’re worried about your family, I’ll do all I can to stop them from getting hurt. It might not make much sense to leave such a big decision to you, but that’s what I believe we should do,” he told her slowly.

He clearly wasn’t tasking Lille with the decision because he wanted to avoid responsibility for what happened, but rather because he wanted to prevent Lille from suffering. That was precisely why she wanted her choice to result in the least amount of harm to Charles. She already knew what made him happy, and what would upset him.

“As it happens, this is something I’ve been thinking about for a long time now. Even back when I was living in the tower,” Lille began. “You may think that everyone in my country is a bad person, but that’s not the experience I had. When I listened to the townspeople, they were warm, kind, regular people. There’s no

difference between us and them.”

“...Indeed,” he agreed.

Lille knew them as people who rejoiced at others’ happiness and shared in others’ pain. She had heard it each and every day of her uneventful life in the tower. They were regular people who loved their families and appreciated the beauty in the world.

“That’s why I never believed they truly hated sorcerers. I thought they were simply frightened of us—frightened of the unknown. They’re afraid of us because we’re different. I always imagined it was just like the fear I felt when I saw big animals in the forest when I was little,” she continued.

She had been scared of those animals because they were bigger and stronger than she was. And when she’d realized she couldn’t reason with them, she grew even more frightened.

“When I saw your memories, I wondered—for just a moment—if I’d been wrong this whole time. Perhaps they really do detest sorcerers enough to want to eradicate them all. But...when I looked at the soldiers who attacked you, they were all terrified. As they fought you, it was clear they didn’t want to, they just didn’t want to die... They were just utterly terrified.”

If Leo heard her theory, he would probably call her stupid. Ark would groan in disbelief, and August might try to refute the idea. Nevertheless, Lille trusted Charles.

“I believe the people of my country simply don’t understand what a sorcerer is. If we could get them to see that we’re neither frightening nor evil, perhaps they would change their minds about us. And I think I could most definitely help them see that,” she proposed.

“Lille...” Charles said affectionately. “I thought you’d say that,” he added more quietly. So why was he still frowning? “It’s true that I want to save your country, but...I feel like things will escalate.” He pursed his lips worriedly, glancing at her. “I don’t want to lose you, Lille.”

His honest gaze swam with an emotion Lille recognized. It was the same look he’d given her when forced to watch the other Lille stop moving in his arms all over again.

“Ever since you came here, I’ve loved watching you grow and learn. Because I saved you, you’ve gotten to do so many things for the first time, and I love watching the way your face lights up when you learn new things. Before I knew it, your growth became my

reason to live.” His face softened.

Lille’s heart pounded at an extraordinary rate. Heat coursed through her body at such a high temperature that she felt as though she might burn alive.

“Do you remember how you thanked me for saving you at your hat ceremony? When you said that, I finally accepted that what I did wasn’t wrong. In the end, the girl I saved went on to save me, too,” he said softly, taking Lille’s braid in his hand.

It might have been the first time he’d ever touched her hair like that. He lifted the braid and carefully brought it to his lips, almost as if he were going to kiss it. But then he dropped it, and it hung by her shoulders again.

She hadn’t felt the press of his lips on her hair, but her heart squeezed as if she’d been kissed all the same.

“Even if I *can* turn back time, I don’t want to see you die ever again. I know I’ve seen similar things happen, time and time again, but I’m still petrified.”

Lille didn’t think anything could ever top what she was hearing. Even if she could never tell him she loved him, she was plenty satisfied. To hear the man she loved say such heartfelt words was wonderful. In fact, she thought she had to be the happiest person in the world at that moment.

“There’s no need to be scared. I’ll make sure I don’t die,” she promised. She had long resolved to never let Charles be alone. She’d long decided she was going to save him. “There’s something I want to do. And, I’ll need everyone’s help to do it,” she said firmly.

“Lille, what are you planning to—?”

She interrupted him with a question of her own. “Do you remember the reason the citizens of my country treat sorcerers as criminals? I told you once.”

“Because they believe sorcerers sell their souls to demons, no?” he recalled. No one knew where the myth originated from, yet everyone believed it to be true. However, not one person had ever proven it fact.

“Exactly. So, all we have to do is show them a being even more powerful than a demon. Someone who can wholly convince them that sorcerers aren’t criminals,” she schemed.

“Don’t tell me...” Charles said with wide eyes, his gaze fixed on Lille. She gave him a sweet smile in return.

“I’ll become a god.”



WHEN Lille outlined her strategy to everyone in Leo's room, a deep frown formed on August's red face. Judging by the almost-empty wine bottle and the exhausted droop to Leo and Ark's shoulders, he had been drinking like a fish while complaining about anything and everything he could think of.

"Do you really think that will work? I'm against the idea. Especially as it may put Lille in danger. You should leave these matters to your elders," he grumbled.

"C'mon, Grand Master. If we go along with Lille's plan, she's the only one who can play the role," Ark countered.

"I understand that. However..."

"If Lille and Master Charlie have already decided to do it, there's no point trying to stop them, to be honest. Those two are really good at pretending to listen and then doing the exact opposite," Leo huffed.

"Huh? Really?" Lille and Charles shared a glance with each other, their faces blank.

"Really! And the fact that you don't even realize it makes it worse. How is it that I'm the one with the most common sense, when I'm the youngest? You adults gotta pull yourselves together!" Leo scolded them.

"...Sorry," all three of them replied in unison, each of them seeing the truth in his words. Leo winced, apparently not expecting a genuine apology.

"Anyway... We don't have any better ideas, so I think Lille's onto something. You agree, don't you, Leo?" Ark said. "What about you, Grand Master? If your nerves get the better of you, no one will blame you if you back out."

"Who do you think I am?!" August bellowed.

"In that case, it's settled. We're doing this together," Ark sang casually, as if they were going on a day trip rather than embarking on something dangerous. His relaxed tone helped to calm everyone down, although anxiety still gnawed deep inside all of them.

"When's the big day?" Ark continued.

"Considering what happened last time, I think it's best we put the plan into action immediately after the new year comes around," Charles suggested.

"In a week's time, hm...? In that case, I believe I should call

for more military strategy meetings,” August said thoughtfully.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. It seems like we won’t get a chance to properly welcome the new year, though. You don’t mind, do you, Lille?” Charles asked considerately.

She smiled. “No, that’s quite all right. I’m happy enough that we’re spending it together.”

She’d never really noted the new year. She only knew that most people went home to spend it with their families, as there had always been very little chatter to listen to in town on those days. If anything, that had made it all the more boring. She didn’t know what kind of occasion it was, or what people usually did, either. However, if it meant she got to spend time with her family, that alone made it worth celebrating.

“Now that school’s on its winter break, I think I shall reside here for a while,” August declared.

Charles immediately began to panic. “Oh, but we don’t have a room for you...” he fretted.

“I’ll sleep in your room, Charles. Surely you have no problem with that, considering there’s nothing left to hide, no?” He shrugged.

“Well, yes, but...never mind. I’ll sleep in Leo’s room.”

“Nah, that won’t do! Leo’s already got his hands full with me sleeping in here,” Ark claimed, clapping one of his hands over Leo’s shoulder and waving the other in the air carelessly. “You gotta sleep in Lille’s room, Master Charlie.”

“Can’t you just turn back into a bird?” Leo asked, exasperated.

“Nope. I’ve decided I’m not gonna turn back until tomorrow morning,” Ark said decisively.

“What the heck? Why?! If you do that, Master Charlie and Lille wil— *Mmf!*”

Ark suddenly pinned Leo’s arms behind his back and slapped a hand over his mouth. “Hahaha, is that so? You really wanna hang out with me, huh? Don’t worry, you’ll have all my attention.” Ark grinned, ignoring Leo’s muffled shouts of protest. Leo squirmed in his grasp, but eventually grew tired of struggling and stood quietly, looking resigned.

“All right, let’s leave the discussion here for today. I get tired doing this sort of stuff in human form. It’s about time we all take a bath and go to bed,” Ark announced, shepherding Charles, August, and Lille out of Leo’s room. The door slammed shut behind them.

“What’s wrong with Ark? Usually, he can’t turn back into a bird quick enough.” Charles raised an eyebrow, puzzled.

For some reason, August started to fidget awkwardly. “W-Well... It must be too cold for him in bird form. He wouldn’t be able to wear clothes, you see,” he said, bluffing.

“Even though he has feathers?”

Lille, on the other hand, could hazard a guess as to why Ark was so insistent on Charles sleeping in her room. He was trying to give them more time alone. He must have noticed how anxious she was feeling, and thought she might find comfort in Charles’s presence.

“Quite frankly, it does not matter why! Both of you should retire to your room at once!” August snapped.

“But, Lille’s a girl, and I... Well, even if I am her mentor, I feel like it’s inappropriate to share a room with her. Maybe I should sleep with you, Master August,” Charles suggested, also beginning to fidget.

“I may as well go home if you’re so intent on torturing me!” August exclaimed harshly.

“Please, don’t be like that...” Charles frowned. “I thought you were old enough to know better than to act like a spoiled brat.”

Insults and complaints flew back and forth between the two. It was possible that August was kicking up such a fuss for Lille’s sake.

“I don’t mind, Master Charlie. I’ll just curl up into a ball and sleep in the corner, so I won’t bother you,” Lille said, trying to persuade him.

“No, that’s not fair to you. I’ll sleep on the sofa in the living room, so feel free to take up the whole bed and relax to your heart’s content.”

“I won’t let you do that.” Lille raised her voice. “You’re exhausted from everything that’s happened today. You need a bed.”

“But, Lille...” he said with a troubled look. “Your bed is only big enough for one person, and I’d feel...”

As they bickered in front of the door, August suddenly interrupted with a huge sigh.

“Have you forgotten that you’re a sorcerer, Charles? You can simply use magic to make it bigger,” he barked.

Charles and Lille turned to look at each other. They both knew they were thinking the same thing:

Oh, right.



"I just finished taking a bath," Lille called as she walked back to her room. Despite the fact that Ark was only in human form for his own convenience, he decided to take a bath all the same, going in with Leo. Apparently, as a bird, he normally bathed in cold water and preened himself.

Charles was lying on the bed, reading. When he heard Lille, he closed the book with a *snap*.

"Oh, welcome back. Guess it's bedtime now," Charles said by way of greeting.

Her skin was warm and moisturized from the bath, and it felt soft against the bed when she plopped down.

Charles jolted and went completely rigid. "Umm... Lille, listen. I really don't want to wake you up if I start sleep-talking again, so I'll go to sleep after I've finished casting a powerful sleep charm on myself," Charles said stiffly.

He was acting strange. Only the moment before, he'd been languidly lounging about, but since saying the word "bedtime," he'd grown restless and fidgety. Lille would have assumed he was nervous, but the look on his face resembled terror more than nerves. What was there to be scared of?

"Huh...?" Lille blinked. "If you're worried about disturbing me, there's no need to go that far. I really don't mind."

"I mind. Actually, there's a lot about this situation I mind."

"Like what?" Lille asked, her brow knitting in concern.

"Well, like...", he trailed off, his cheeks blazing. Steam bubbled from the surface of his skin. It couldn't be heat from the bath so long after his turn, so Lille could safely assume her magic made it visible to her. "A-Anyway, I definitely won't wake up until morning, so you'll be able to sleep soundly. Goodnight, Lille," he gabbled.

Then, without another word, he buried himself beneath the blankets and went straight to sleep. Curiously, Lille poked at his cheek, but there was no change in his calm, regular breathing.

"He really meant it. I can't wake him up..." she remarked in amazement.

She wondered if the sleep charm prevented nightmares. Or did it just not allow him to wake up, even if he did have bad dreams? She was slightly worried, but if the charm enabled Charles to sleep

deeply and recover from the day's exhaustion, perhaps it was a good thing.

Lille tucked herself into bed next to him, but she just couldn't settle down. Their bodies weren't touching, but the idea that Charles was completely vulnerable beside her made her heart race.

...What should I do? I don't think I can sleep like this.

She was beginning to regret not asking him to cast a sleep charm on her as well. While Lille lay as straight as a soldier, her arms at her sides, Charles turned over in his sleep. She could see his elegant profile right next to her, the curved slope of his nose pointing toward the ceiling. If either of them moved, they would be close enough to kiss.

Do I truly have the power to protect him?

She never wanted him to use the watch ever again. But what if they failed? What if she died? The more she thought about her misgivings, the more the fear set in.

She wished she had a good luck charm. Something to give her courage. Something that proved she could get through anything.

"Sorry," she whispered under her breath, not quite loud enough to be audible. Slowly, she leaned forward, bringing her lips closer to his face.

He should save any real kisses for someone who's special to him, so I hope it's okay if I give him one that represents my love as his family.

She softly pressed her lips to his cheek.

It was the first time she had ever kissed someone. If she'd ever done anything to make her a criminal, then that tiny kiss was her crime, a small indulgence committed under the cover of night. The only witness to her secret vow was the pure-white snow piled outside the window, the snowflakes her sole confidants.



A week passed in the blink of an eye. Many of their days were filled with strategy meetings, and they even carried out a practice run of the plan in the garden. They all stayed up to see the new year in together, raising a toast with glasses of wine and fruit juice. Under Leo's instruction, Lille helped to make a feast for the occasion, and August even gave her some money as a gift. Apparently, it was customary for older adults to give money to children in honor of the

new year.

Lille wished it could last forever. If only they could give up on their plight and pretend nothing had ever happened and live out their days in peace. But every time Lille caught herself thinking that way, she remembered everything Charles had done for them. He was sensitive to pain whether he was the one being hurt or someone else was—even if he'd never met those who were suffering. For that reason, Lille wanted to make sure he overcame the ordeal with nothing left to haunt him.

She was committed to pursuing the outcome that would make Charles the happiest. If she could, she wanted to show him a beautiful world, full of kindness.

If I manage that...I'll ask one last thing of him.

Then, before they knew it, the day was upon them.



“**IS** everybody ready?” Charles asked in a hushed tone, loud enough for them to hear but not loud enough for the sound to travel. Quietly, they all nodded in reply, keeping their voices down as they braced themselves.

“You know it,” Ark whispered.

“I’m ready, too,” Leo said.

“And me,” Lille chimed in.

“Of course, I’m always prepared,” August said gruffly.

Under the cover of an invisibility charm, they had to speak softly. August had been wholly against the idea until the very last moment, but finally let it slide under the circumstances.

Lille looked at the city around them with a strange feeling in her chest. She had lived on its outskirts as a child, so the city center wasn’t familiar to her in the slightest. Charles’s hometown was nothing like it, either. Perhaps because it wasn’t a magic nation, many of the workers boasted large, muscular bodies, and the main form of transport appeared to be horse-drawn carts.

“All right. Let’s do this,” Charles said, taking a deep breath.

Ark flew down from Charles’s shoulder, turning into his original, colossal roc form as he landed. The impact of his transformation sent a huge gust of wind flying down the road, whipping up a cloud of dust in its path. The townspeople looked a

little bewildered by the sudden change in weather, but soon dismissed it and carried on as normal.

“...So far, so good. C’mon, Lille—hop up,” Ark urged her, lowering his body. She clambered onto his back with a grunt. Whenever she rode him, she couldn’t help but recall the first time she had done so—the day everything started.

And today, everything will end.

The long, convoluted sequence of events that had led to that day would finally come to a close.

“Lille,” Charles called to her, his tone serious. “If I feel like you’re in any danger at all, I’ll cast an invisibility charm on you again. Don’t push yourself, okay?”

She nodded. “I won’t, Master Charlie.”

“You can do it, Lille. We’ll be helping with our own magic from behind the scenes,” Leo reminded her.

“Thank you, Leo.”

“If the situation calls for it, I’ll cast you a very sturdy barrier at once. So don’t worry, and simply carry out your own duties,” August said firmly.

“Thank you very much, Master August.”

With a huge flap of his wings, Ark and Lille left the three of them behind, their nervous faces getting smaller and smaller. Buffeted from above by rhythmic blasts of wind, an increasing number of townspeople started to look up into the clouds in confusion.

Once they were high enough, Ark beat his wings more slowly, maintaining their position in the sky. Far below them, Charles gave the signal.

One, two, three...!

After counting to three in her head, Lille tightened her grip on Ark’s feathers, clenching her fists. Things were about to get risky.

“Wh-What on earth is that?!”

“Is that bird magical? I’ve never seen one so big!”

“Wait. I think I can see a person on its back!”

“Yeah! They’re glowing! And—are those wings?!”

As Charles undid the invisibility charm on Ark and Lille, the townspeople began to clamor. They stared up at the sky in stupefied amazement, gasping and exclaiming in surprise. Lille could see the soldiers that had been standing guard outside the castle sprinting toward the commotion.

“...Silence!” Lille commanded, shouting into the open air. Within moments, the frantic noise of the crowd died down.

My ears are ringing. My voice doesn't sound anything like my own.

The wings fanning out from her back were a result of Leo's handiwork, who had stayed up many nights crafting them. He was casting magic from the ground to make the wings move in a believable way. Meanwhile, Charles cast an amplification charm on her voice, and caused a halo of light to glow around her. August was in charge of the barrier surrounding them, constantly making sure no one could hurt either of them.

The long, white dress Lille wore was made especially for the occasion; luckily, The Three Needles had been able to get it done within the week. It was unlikely that anyone would recognize Lille, but Charles ensured the glowing light obscured her face all the same.

“Who the heck are you?!” one man shouted from within the throng. Most of the crowd was looking at her blankly, as if they didn't know what to do with themselves.

Lille's script had been written and agreed on by all five of them. She had practiced it so many times that the words were effectively seared into her brain. All she had to do was trust in herself.

“I...am a god,” she announced, smiling fearlessly after a pause for dramatic effect. Only five people in the whole world knew that she'd rehearsed that smile countless times in the mirror.

“A...a god...?”

“She can't be!”

“If it's true, why would she show up somewhere like this?”

The people were reacting just as they'd expected. That was a good sign.

“I have descended upon this country to save it from chaos,” she declared, her voice strong and confident. Murmurs rippled through the crowd. “The government of this land is trying to initiate warfare. They plot to invade the magic nations.”

People began to shout, complaining that they'd heard no talk of such plans. It seemed to be the case that the government had planned on keeping the fact to themselves.

“If the war comes to pass, this country has no chance of surviving. Many people will die, and the towns and cities shall be consumed by flames,” Lille said knowingly, attempting to appeal to

their emotions.

Many were terrified, but others grew angry. Most likely, those individuals had never even considered the possibility that they could lose a war.

“Prepare to meet your end, scum!”

“Get her!”

The soldiers finally arrived within range and began shooting arrows into the sky. Immediately, they bounced off August’s barrier with a clatter.

“It is futile to attack me. I have witnessed the way you treat sorcerers all these years. That must change. If you choose not to heed my warning, I may as well destroy this land here and now,” she threatened. Children began to cry in response to her menacing tone. It wounded her heart to hear, but her deceit was for the greater good.

“Who says you’re a god anyway?!”

“What a load of old crock! Sorcerers sell their souls to demons, you know!”

“Exactly! If she’s defending those criminals, she’s gotta be a demon, not a god!”

In contrast to the women and children cowering in fear, the men and soldiers became even more agitated. However, Lille had anticipated them calling her a liar. In fact, this was the most important part of the performance—and something only Lille could do.

She closed her eyes and listened carefully to the cries of the crowd. Among them, she picked out a voice she recognized.

“If it’s proof you need, then proof I shall deliver,” she proclaimed. “You, in the blue shirt. Oh, whoops, not you! Sorry, I actually meant the young man standing in front of the stall.” For a moment, she’d accidentally spoken as she normally would.

Under his breath, Ark muttered, “Idiot.”

“Huh? M-Me?” the man stuttered, pointing at himself.

“I-Indeed,” she answered, mentally shaking herself. “I know all about you. You’re a hen-pecked husband, and you complain about how domineering your wife is to your colleagues at work every day!”

“What? H-How did you...?” He gaped up at her, bewildered.

“Honey, is that true?!”

A marital quarrel broke out between him and the woman at

his side, which temporarily distracted everyone from their hostile disbelief. The people around the couple scrambled to calm both of them down.

“And *you!*” Lille pointed into the crowd. “You might pretend to be a stubborn, old man in public, but when you’re at home, you do nothing but dote on your cat! You even speak to him in a baby voice! I know, for I am an omniscient god!”

“H-How can you know something that even my family doesn’t...?” the old man said shakily, breaking out into a cold sweat as people turned around to stare at him curiously.

“If you still find it hard to believe me, do not worry. I have plenty more knowledge to divulge. Now, *you!*” she said, pointing yet again.

One by one, she exposed the secrets of every person whose voice she remembered, silently apologizing in her mind as she did so. She had never imagined that her days spent listening to their conversations in the tower would come in so handy.

“Please, stop it! I believe you already!”

And when one person caved in, others soon followed suit.

“We believe you’re a god, all right?! So what do you want from us?” a soldier wearing a particularly magnificent set of armor called out to Lille. If she wasn’t mistaken, he was the imperial commander.

“All I ask is that you swear not to start any wars, and to improve your treatment of sorcerers,” Lille demanded.

“Oh, but...with my authority, I don’t think I can...”

She’d expected that. The only officials with the power to change such laws were the senate, and the royal family themselves.

“I see. In that case, let’s go about this another way,” she proposed. With a snap of her fingers, Charles cast a magic circle in the middle of the plaza.

“Wh-What is that?”

“Watch out!”

As everyone backed away, the circle glowed a bright yellow, and a gong-like sound echoed through the air as the king and some government officials suddenly materialized in its center.

The officials stood frozen in place, flabbergasted as they clutched their canes for dear life. Evidently, the king had been transported while sitting down, as he promptly fell onto his backside as soon as he appeared.

“Your Majesty!” The soldiers rushed to his side to help him up.
So, that’s what the king looks like...

The tower was a long way from the castle, so she’d never heard his voice, either. His overgrown beard and plump figure gave him a somewhat kingly image, but something about his expression felt frail. Actually, he didn’t have much of a royal presence at all. His dazzling clothes and sparkling crown didn’t seem to fit right, almost as if they’d been forced onto him.

“Your Majesty, I trust you heard what I said from the palace. I suggest you make that vow at once,” Lille all but ordered.

Sweat dripped down the king’s temples. He leaned over to the imperial commander and whispered in his ear.

The commander’s eyes widened. “B-But...” he muttered, sounding troubled. However, with the officials glaring at him, he eventually looked up at Lille and spoke hesitantly.

“He says...that won’t be possible...”

The people—who’d thought they were finally about to be freed from their terror—roared back into disorder.

“Then shall I simply burn this country to the ground, right here and now?” Lille bellowed, feigning anger.

“H-He says...just try to if you think you can.”

The plaza fell completely silent. The distrust the people had for the king was clear on their faces. It was only natural; he had just agreed to let the country and its people perish, after all.

The townspeople seemed taken aback by his reaction, but Lille knew better. If the king were a reasonable, caring man, then she would never have been locked up for ten years in the first place.

“You have made your decision. And so, I shan’t hold back,” she said resolutely.

As Lille raised her hands, pillars of fire sprung up at various spots around the plaza. That was thanks to Charles. He was obviously choosing places where the flames wouldn’t cause anything to catch alight, as well as far enough away that no one would get burned.

“Eeeeeek!”

“P-Please don’t!”

Even the sturdiest of men were on their knees, covering their heads in fear.

“W-Wait! Please, just give us some more time...” the imperial commander begged, kneeling so low that his head was almost

touching the ground. Lille thought it bizarre that the king didn't try to stop him, nor scold him. The officials, meanwhile, hadn't looked at Lille even once.

"Now, why would I do that? Hmm... My familiar here has little patience, you know," she growled, closing her eyes and pretending to think it over.

Ark gave a small chuckle. "You got that right," he commented quietly, even though Lille wasn't the one who'd thought of the line.

"...Very well. I shall give you one more chance," she declared, looking down at the king. "Look and listen very carefully, Your Majesty. This is the state your kingdom is in." Reaching down to the belt tied around her thigh, she drew a knife from its sheath.

"Are you sure about this, Lille? You spent so long growing it," Ark asked, not for the first time.

"I'm okay, Ark. I just never had the confidence to do it until now. That's all," she said firmly. Then, she positioned the knife halfway down her intricate braid. The memory of how she lost her life rose to the surface of her mind, as if to test her resolve.

I admit I'm scared. But I know I'll be okay this time.

Because, this time, she wasn't alone. She had a family who'd save her no matter what.

Tucked inside her dress, the stone of her pendant glowed warm against her skin. And as she held tightly onto the handle of the knife and moved it in a horizontal line, strands of hair fell from the blade onto Ark's back.



Her magic flowed from the severed ends of her hair, the mana dwelling inside sparking free. Lille could feel her power intensifying, raw energy running through her all the way to the tips of her fingers.

“Wh-What’s she doing?”

“Beats me... I can’t really see properly.”

When Lille turned her attention to the townspeople, she heard their thoughts just as easily as she’d heard their voices. She could even look into the hearts of the king and his officials. She consumed the emotions of every single person standing in that plaza.

Her chest constricted. Some people were hiding their pain under the guise of unfaltering smiles, and others were dealing with anger beneath their serene façades. The visceral loneliness of those who thought nobody needed them was so harrowingly cold, it felt as though her heart had turned to ice.

Hearts really are a heavy burden.

Even the most complex emotions came filtering through to her as if she were the one experiencing them herself.

“Lille. Are you okay?” Ark called out in concern after noticing she was clutching at her chest and beginning to hyperventilate.

“Yes, I’m all right. Thank you, Ark,” she replied, calming herself down. At that moment, her heart was like a melting pot of every person surrounding her. When she found what she was looking for within them, however, she also found the courage to stay strong.

The support of those precious to her gave her the strength. She was doing this to see her loved ones smile. To protect her family’s happiness.

She had listened to the townspeople for so many years. Even after being imprisoned and seeing herself die, she couldn’t bring herself to hate the citizens of her home country. How could she, when they had provided her comfort every day for nearly a decade? They really were no different from people from any other nation. They were just like Lille, and everyone Lille knew. She was sure of it, since she’d finally found the proof she’d been looking for in their hearts.

At last, she held her head high, and peered down at the people beneath her. It was time for the final touches.

“I have just seen what’s inside every single one of your hearts,”

she called out at the top of her voice. Everyone stared up at her with a perplexed look on their face. Some began to panic, fearful that their secrets would be exposed to the public the same way as before.

“I saw that every soul here fears war. Even if some of you won’t say it aloud, you’re all thinking you don’t want to be involved. Therefore, I shall reiterate my previous point: you do not have to do this. If none of you wants to go to war, there is no reason to do so. Simply erase any such plans,” she said ringingly, with a forceful gaze.

The people hesitantly looked around, sharing nervous glances with one another. They still seemed to have some doubts, but were clearly relieved to know that everyone was feeling the same way. They weren’t alone.

“While many of you say sorcerers are criminals, not one of you has ever been hurt by one. You’re only afraid of them because no one has ever told you the truth: they are purely human—just as you all are.”

The prejudice began as an old superstition from an unknown source. Nobody knew who first spread the belief, or when. However, clearing up misinformation was far more difficult than spreading it. No one denied Lille’s wisdom that time, but no one called out to agree, either.

“Your Majesty. I have seen your thoughts, also,” she said sagely. The king froze on the spot, his body going rigid and trembling. His skin was almost blue at that point.

“Your gifted older brother died after falling ill with a plague, and you always resented the fact that you succeeded to the throne in his place. You hated how spineless you were, and how subserviently you listened to whatever the senate said. You only decided to start a war in order to prove yourself, did you not? It’s nothing more than a rebellious phase. You’re like a child throwing a tantrum, trying to make others accept you despite your own lack of confidence,” she articulated.

Though the current portion of the plan wasn’t scripted, Lille was finding it easier to speak smoothly. Really, all she had to do was recite the exact feelings she found in the king’s heart.

“Neither magic nor sorcerers are to be feared. Magic has existed in this world since the beginning of time, just as water and air have. Sorcerers are not criminals; they are merely people who

can control that force of nature. What reason is there to fear something that has always been with you?"

All of a sudden, a child began to cry, their wails echoing through the tense silence. Everyone looked to the source of the sound. Presumably, the child had fallen over after being pushed by the flow of the crowd.

Leo, I'm counting on you.

Lille exchanged a glance with Leo, who was standing in wait in the shadow of a building. When he figured out her intent, he maneuvered his way over to the child, avoiding bumping into anyone. Then, Leo surreptitiously cast a healing spell on him. The little boy suddenly stopped crying and blinked with wide eyes, shocked by how quickly the pain had disappeared.

"This is the true nature of magic. It protects the ones you love. It makes life just that little bit easier. It's something for people to enjoy. It's not intended to hurt people or make them suffer in the slightest," Lille said, gesturing for the crowd. The little boy that had been bawling only moments before swiftly jumped to his feet, and started to shout eagerly to the adults around him.

"I get it now! Magic's really gentle and kind!" he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling after experiencing magic for the first time in his life. The innocent sincerity of his words and excitement touched the hearts of the people around him.

"Wow, was it really that nice, honey?"

"If that's what he thinks, it might actually be true."

As his parents picked him up and murmured to him, the aftereffects of what just happened gradually began to spread through the crowd. Charles, Leo, and August were all smiling slightly as they watched the scene unfold from their respective positions.

"Your Majesty. If you vow to do what I asked you, I shall impart magical protection unto this land. Surely, with that outcome, your people will come to love you as a ruler who makes wise decisions. Alternatively, if you refuse, they will forevermore pass down the tale of a foolish king who destroyed his kingdom for his own gain. The choice is yours."

The king fell to his knees in defeat. The imperial commander moved to help him up, but he batted the soldier's hands away and got to his feet again of his own accord.

"Very well—you have my word. I'll do as you wish, o god," he

said with a hint of finality. When he stood up tall to look her in the eye, Lille finally saw a glimpse of a true king in him—one that endeavored to protect his nation.

...It's finally over!

A round of applause thundered up from the masses. The townspeople shouted enthusiastic cries of celebration, the imperial commander was moved to tears, and the officials rushed to praise the king one by one as he stood there with a begrudging look on his face. It was all over. As for the magical protection she'd promised them, August would take care of all the proceedings to arrange an alliance between the two countries.

"With the matter sorted, I will now be on my way home," Lille announced, satisfied. With a powerful flap of his vast wings, Ark soared up into the sky. She needed the people to believe she'd gone back to wherever gods lived, so the plan was for Ark to fly until no one could see them anymore.

With each beat of his wings, the hustle and bustle of the city center grew quieter. Just as they reached the deserted outskirts of the city, a woman yelled out to stop them.

"Wait!" she screamed. "A-Are you...?"

Lille looked down to see a small group of people sprinting to try catch up with them, wheezing harshly. Something within her stirred as she realized how familiar they were; they were the family from her dreams.

"Mother... Father..."

They were ten years older than she remembered them, but there was no doubt that they were Lille's family. Her little brother had grown as tall as Leo, and her grandfather was staggering after them with a cane in his hand.

"Are you our...our..."

"*Our daughter?*" were the words that Lille's mother's eyes screamed, although her voice couldn't quite manage. It was remarkable that she could tell it was Lille despite how much time had passed and with Charles's magic still at work. How?

"...Lille, what's up? Don't you want to go back home to your family?" Ark asked, slowing down.

"Mm... No, I don't think so," she said, shaking her head.

She had a new family now, and she had no intention of ever returning to her home country. Though, she still hoped to introduce her new family to them one day.

An image of her parents, brother, and grandfather standing in the magic item shop flashed through her mind. She even imagined Charles and her father bashfully exchanging pleasantries. It was a glimpse of a very happy future. If that future ever actually came to pass...

“Ark, could you fly a little lower?” she asked.

“Got it.”

When she was close enough to see their faces clearly, Lille unclasped the pendant from her neck. She threw it in her mother’s direction, who caught it by reflex, and both her parents looked down at it with bemused expressions on their faces.

“Take good care of it for me! I’ll come back when we can meet properly!”

As she called out to them, tears were rolling down her cheeks before she knew it. As proof they would meet again, she thought it would be fitting for them to keep a piece of her heart. She couldn’t think of anything better to give them.

“...All right, Ark. You can go now.”

“Are you sure?” he double-checked, surprised.

“Yes.” She nodded. “That’s enough for now.”

As Ark rose into the sky again, voices came chasing after them.

“We’ll always be waiting for you, darling!”

“Promise you’ll come back, Sis!”

“Take care of yourself!”

The wind carried the sobs and tears that Lille couldn’t hold back, droplets flying behind her. When she turned around, she could see the city fading into the distance. At that moment, she realized that from that point forward, whenever she said “hometown”—she would really mean it.



WHEN they got home, they enveloped each other in a group hug. Half-crying, half-laughing, they congratulated each other on a job well done. Due to having to pull off so many complicated spells, Charles, August, and Leo were even more exhausted than Lille and Ark were.

August breathed a heavy, gruff sigh as he collapsed onto the sofa, and Lille hesitated to approach him. Before she and Ark had

returned, she'd done something she was starting to regret. She hadn't considered how important it might be to August until afterward.

"Um, Master August? There's something I need to apologize for. My pendant..."

"Oh, don't dwell on it. It was nothing expensive, so I'll just find you another stone," he replied detachedly.

"But..." She knew he was lying; that stone was extremely valuable.

"It often happens that students lose their stones. In those cases, we simply issue them a replacement, so there's no need to feel guilty."

"Thank you very much..." she said, feeling conflicted.

"It makes sense that you left them with something that's precious to you. Otherwise, there would be little point leaving them anything at all. If anything, I'm happy that you deemed it a worthy article," he said gently.

Lille looked at him with wide eyes. Only Ark should've known she'd met her past family. "You heard what happened, didn't you?" Lille surmised.

"I saw there was a family chasing after you, so just in case, I decided to listen in and block everyone else from noticing with magic. Don't fret; I shan't tell Charles a thing. I'll say thank you in his place, though, for coming back to this house for us."

"Oh, no, I don't need any thanks..." she said, waving her hands as if to bat his words away. She'd come back because she wanted to be there. That was all. Really, she was the one who ought to be grateful.

"Make sure you talk to Charles when you want to see them again," August advised her with a nod.

"I will, thank you," she replied, nodding in return.

As soon as she grew into a full-fledged adult and the political situation calmed down, she would visit. She would hold her head high, and of course, Charles would be with her.



THEY all came together to drink some tea in the living room, courtesy of Lille and Leo. Once they all had their cups, Charles

cleared his throat as if preparing for an announcement.

"Thank you, everyone. You all worked really hard today," Charles said earnestly, looking at each of them with a sincere expression of gratitude. "It's amazing that we pulled it off so well. I really can't thank you all enough."

"I'd like to say my thanks as well," Lille chimed in. "Thank you all for saving my homeland. Thank you so much."

She felt like no matter how many times she said it, it would never be enough. If just one thing had gone wrong, they would have had a terrible war on their hands. And yet, in the face of that pressure, everyone had worked together without a moment's hesitation.

"Did you expect anything less from Master Charlie's familiar?" Ark puffed his chest out.

"I mean, I'm an apprentice too, so it's only natural that I'd help you both," Leo said, grinning.

"Moving forward, it has made things much easier for me as well. Now, we'll be able to form an alliance with no hardships," August commented, pleased. "If you really cannot thank me enough, then I suggest you give Charles plenty of work to do on my behalf. I would appreciate that."

"I'll do my best." Lille grinned.

Everyone wore mellow smiles as they sipped at their tea. It felt like forever since they'd been able to take things easy.

"It's finally over, isn't it?" The words happened to spill from Lille's lips.

"Yeah," Charles replied, his kind eyes holding Lille's. "I'm so glad you're alive. Your hair might be short now, but it really suits you."

"Th-Thank you," she replied bashfully, putting a hand to her cold neck in embarrassment. She still wasn't used to the feeling of having short hair. It fell to about the same level as her chin, and her head felt lighter.

Somehow, Charles's gaze and tone of voice seemed even softer than usual. As Lille fidgeted shyly, Ark—who was in human form—came up from behind and slapped an arm around her shoulders.

"We gotta celebrate! I think this calls for a feast," he hooted.

"And who'll have to cook this *feast*, Ark?" Leo asked, glowering. However, August quickly stopped him with a pat to his shoulder.

"There's no harm in dining out every now and then. It'll be my treat," he offered kindly.

Lille beamed. "Really, Master August?"

"Of course. Now, we must all get ready to go into town."

Whoops echoed through the house as three of them returned to their rooms with a spring in their steps. Lille, on the other hand, reached out to gently tug on Charles's sleeve.

"Master Charlie..."

"What's wrong, Lille? We need to get changed. You must be cold in that dress," he remarked, gesturing toward the white, floaty dress she wore. The fabric was certainly thin, so she'd layered a thick cloak over it. She hadn't felt cold when she was riding Ark through the sky, but that was probably just the adrenaline.

"Oh, no, I'm fine. Before we get ready to leave, I wanted to ask if you could do something with me..." she said uncertainly.

"All right, then. Shall we go to my room?" he offered, guiding her to his room. "You put so much work into helping me—it's only natural for me to do something for you, too."

Charles's room wasn't locked anymore. They walked straight inside, and the door shut behind them with a *click*.

"So, what would you like me to do?" Charles asked with a smile.

It was something Lille had determined she wanted before they'd even carried out the plan. They'd successfully put an end to a terrible future, but there was still one thing weighing on her mind.

"Master Charlie...let's destroy the pocket watch."

"What...?" He blinked, eyes wide. For a few moments he was rendered speechless. "I... I can't do that. If we destroy it, I won't be able to fix things anymore. What if another war breaks out? What if someone's in danger?"

"Master Charlie," she said firmly, grabbing Charles's hand and squeezing it. He looked extremely nervous, biting at his bottom lip until it turned white. It was true that he never wanted to use the watch again, but that didn't detract from his fear of letting it go.

"The world, as well as the people in it, is not so weak as to need your constant protection. Even if something does go wrong, everyone has the power to rebuild their lives. People are strong enough to start again," Lille assured him, keeping a tight hold on his hand.

"Lille..."

“You don’t need to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders anymore. Instead, you can choose your own path. If something bad happens in our tale, we don’t have to start writing all over again—we should keep on going. I mean, both of us have the power to help people, don’t we?” she added.

Besides, Lille had an inkling that at that point the world would want to give Charles a little peace as thanks for all he’d done. She wanted him to concentrate on his own path in life, rather than dealing with everyone’s problems *but* his own.

“You think I should live for myself rather than for other people...?” he summarized, looking unsure. “To be honest, I’m not sure I *can*. It’s been so long since I’ve lived that way, I don’t even remember how to.”

“I’ll help you, then. I’ll make sure you’re so busy doing all the things you’ve ever wanted to do, you’ll forget the watch ever even existed,” Lille promised.

When she thought about it, she rarely ever saw Charles take some time for himself. Whenever he was free, he was either planning lessons or creating new magic items. Even the books he read were either textbooks or grimoires.

They could start small. Perhaps there was somewhere he wanted to visit, or a particular book he wanted to read. So long as he found something that he enjoyed for his sake and his sake alone, they could work up to bigger things based on that.

“Well...all right, then. If... If I have you here with me, I feel like I could learn to live like that,” he said, smiling. He closed his eyes, immersed in his thoughts for a few moments, then opened them again with a certain resolve. “Let’s destroy it. I don’t need it anymore.”

He placed the pocket watch on his desk. Lille drew out the same knife she’d used to cut her hair and passed it to him.

“Together,” she said, cradling his trembling hands in her own over the hilt of the knife. “Okay?”

“...Yeah. I’m ready. Let’s do it.”

When Lille nodded in reply, Charles drew in a deep breath.

“Here goes. One...two...three...!”

They brought the blade down on the watch at full force. With a high-pitched *clash*, parts and pieces went flying. Scraps of metal and glass littered the surface of the desk like tiny stars, and the clock face was cracked down the middle. The second hand stopped

ticking, too. Thus, Charles's companion through time was finally laid to rest.

"Now, it...it really is over, huh?" Charles whispered, stumbling over his words as he struggled to catch his breath. He wheezed as though he'd just finished running a marathon.

"I don't think so, Master Charlie," Lille disagreed with a hum. At first, she thought destroying the watch would mark the end, too. However, apart from the sense of relief she'd always expected, another, new emotion bloomed in her chest.

"This is the beginning."



THE following weeks passed in peace, and before Lille knew it, the snow began to melt. The trees of the forest no longer boasted snow-white caps, and frogs leapt around the vegetable patches after coming out of hibernation.

Winter became spring, making it the second spring since Lille had arrived at Charles's house. A whole year had passed, and with it, so had the seasons. That was what the breeze told her as it gently brushed past her cheeks, carrying the exact same scent as on her first day there.

Leo passed the entrance exam for the academy, which meant he would be enrolling as a third-year student in the coming month. All of the students had to live in the academy dorms, so he was moving away from home. The following day, he was going back to his parents' house to tie up a few loose ends and say goodbye, so they were having a farewell party of their own that day. They invited August, too, but with the new school term beginning, he only had enough time to stop by later.

"Leo, you'll keep working just as hard once you start school, won't you?" Lille asked.

"This is your second home, so come back whenever you feel like it," Charles said, smiling.

"It's weird to think that there'll be one less person around," Ark added sadly.

All throughout their goodbyes, Leo wore a strained smile.

"C'mon, stop making such a big deal about it. It's not like you're never gonna see me again. I'll definitely come back when I

have a day off.”

“But...!” Lille protested.

“I’m kinda happy that you’ll miss me, though, Lille. Why don’t you just apply to the academy as well?”

She shook her head immediately.

“I’m all right here, thank you.” She smiled. “I already have plans. Besides, there are a lot of magic items I want to make, too.”

“Hmph,” Leo huffed. “All right, then.”

As they lost themselves in their memories together and spoke about their futures, the evening flew by. The feast they’d been preparing since the previous night went down a treat; apart from the dishes they left aside for August, they ate almost everything. The fact that Ark was in human form contributed significantly in that regard.

“Leo, should I bring dessert over now?” Lille suggested. The table was looking quite empty, so it felt like a good time. For dessert, she’d baked an especially large strawberry tart—Leo’s favorite.

“Sounds good. I’ll make some tea,” Leo agreed. When Lille remembered she wouldn’t be able to drink Leo’s tea whenever she wanted to anymore, her heart throbbed. Not to mention, there were so many recipes he hadn’t taught her yet. There was still so much she wanted to talk about with him.

“It really will be lonely without him here...” she sighed quietly. She was determined not to send him off with tears, but she still wished that the next day would never come.

“Lille, the tea’s ready. What about dessert?” Leo called.

“O-Oh, yes, I’ll bring it now!” she called back, shaking herself.

After pressing a knife into it to start the first slice, she brought the tart to the table on a huge plate.

Leo gasped in amazement. “When you wouldn’t let me help you with dessert, I was so curious about what it could be. I’ve never seen a strawberry tart this big!” he said, beaming excitedly.

Lille grinned. “I’m so happy you like it.”

“I feel like you’re even better at baking than me now,” Leo marveled. “Phew, that kinda puts my mind at rest. You don’t even need me here!”

“...That’s not true,” she murmured. It came out in a much gloomier tone of voice than she anticipated, and the room fell silent for a few moments.

Leo exhaled. "Could you all *please* stop with the long faces? You know I want to see smiles when I go!"

"I'm sorry. I just..." Lille nibbled her lip.

"I'm sorry, too," Charles interjected.

"Me too," Ark said gruffly.

"It's fine, I guess..." he replied, waving their apologies off. "Anyway, I got Master Charlie and Lille some presents, so cheer up, you two." It sounded like he'd only just remembered. Lille had never expected he would do something like that for them.

"You got presents for us?" she blinked.

"Ooh, I wonder what it is!" Charles mused.

"I'll give it to you later, so just drink your tea and eat dessert for now. Here," Leo said, placing their teacups down in front of them. Lille's cup was full to the brim, and she worried she might spill it.

"Oh, thank you," Charles said, smiling.

"Thank you, Leo," Lille echoed. When she put the rim of the cup to her lips, she noticed Leo staring at her. He was acting a little strange. Out of curiosity, she looked over at Ark, and found that he was doing the same thing to Charles—staring at him intently.

"Whew. Leo, your tea's delicious, as always. The strawberry tart is amazing too, Lille," Charles praised. He'd already drained the entire cup without a care in the world. Apparently, Lille was the only one who noticed them staring. No—she was probably reading too much into it, anyway.

"Really? Glad to hear it." Leo grinned. "By the way, Lille. This has been on my mind for a while, but...how do you feel about Master Charlie?"

"...?!"

She made a strangled sound in her throat. That was the last thing she thought he'd ask, and the tea in her mouth went down her windpipe when she gasped. She was quickly reduced to a coughing mess, struggling to catch her breath as her throat complained.

"Lille, are you all right?" Charles fretted, giving her a firm pat on the back to help her.

Gradually, she regained her composure, and her breathing went back to normal as Charles rubbed her back. "L-Leo, where on earth did that come from?" she said hoarsely.

"I was just curious. I thought you might have a crush on someone." He shrugged. "So, is Master Charlie the one you love?"

Oh, and I mean in a romantic way, of course.”

Naturally, Lille was shocked that he’d even picked up on it, but that he asked the question out of nowhere was even more bewildering. There was no way she could tell him the truth with Charles sitting right there.

I do love him, but...

“Only as family,” she tried to say, but all of a sudden, her lips took on a life of their own.

“I love Master Charlie.”

For a moment, she looked around blankly, trying to figure out who’d spoken. Then, in a soul-crushing moment of realization, she clapped her hands over her mouth. *She* had said it.

“O-Oh, I... Um...” she panicked.

“Uh...” Charles cleared his throat awkwardly. “You mean, you love me as my apprentice, don’t you?” Her thoughts swam, but fortunately, Charles had completely misinterpreted her declaration. She tried to nod and agree with him.

“No. I’m in love with you. In a romantic way.” Her lips moved on their own again.

“Wh-What?” Charles stuttered, his cheeks turning bright pink as he covered his mouth just as Lille had. She was really done for, then. Nothing she could say would be enough to talk her way out of the situation.

“What about you, Master Charlie? How do you feel about Lille?” Ark asked, darting toward him with a sense of excitement.

“W-Well...” he began, but then he simply gaped, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. “Mm? ...?! Mmmnn! Aaaaah!” After making a series of strange faces, he started uttering random noises as if he were doing vocal exercises.

“That’s weird. Whenever I try to reply, my voice won’t come out,” he said, his brow furrowing in concern. While Lille mirrored his expression, Leo and Ark suddenly heaved huge, disappointed sighs.

“Aww. You were right; it only half worked on Master Charlie.”

“Lille was a great success, though. I guess the magic just wasn’t strong enough.”

Lille had no idea what they were talking about. Charles, on the other hand, cleared his throat, and shot them a death glare.

“Ark... Leo...” he said coolly. “Did you do something to our tea?”

"We just used a little truth serum. Well—more like a magic potion which prevents someone from lying," Ark explained.

"Me and Ark made it together. That's your present!" Leo grinned.

She'd *thought* there was something strange about the tea. She should've realized what was happening as soon as she noticed Leo acting weird. The moment Leo said he'd gotten them presents, he had her well and truly fooled.

"If we can't lie, does that mean...?" Charles trailed off.

Ark nodded. "Yup. What Lille just said is how she actually feels."

Charles's eyes widened. Lille wanted to curl up into a ball and cry. She feared that if she tried to say anything, her voice would betray her and once again reveal more than she intended. All she could do was stay quiet, her bottom lip quivering. She hadn't wanted to tell him in such a way. Leo was so *mean* for dropping this bombshell on her just before he left. She whipped her head around to scowl at him, but for some reason, he replied with a daring grin.

"Hey, Master Charlie. Are you just gonna leave Lille in the lurch? Keeping quiet while she pours her heart out? Don't you have any pride as a man?" he challenged.

"Keeping quiet about what?" Charles asked indignantly.

"Your feelings for her, remember?" Leo rolled his eyes. "I know you've worked it out."

"I... I... Mm!" Charles said, frustrated as his voice stopped working and his lips moved silently.

"Lille, just read his mind. We can't sit here all day," Ark interrupted.

"What? No! I can't do that!" she protested.

"Just do it," Ark prodded. He forcibly grabbed hold of her hand and pushed it onto Charles. She knew nothing would happen unless she wanted it to—or at least, that was what she thought. Instead, an instant later, Charles's voice echoed inside her head.

"I love her. I love her in the exact same way she loves me."

"Huh?" she said cautiously. When she looked at his face, he merely stared at her with confusion in his eyes. She'd definitely just read his mind. What she'd heard was the unadulterated truth.

"Since when...?" she asked, her heart pounding. Her breathing sped up and her head felt like cotton wool, just like when she'd been delirious with fever.

“Wait, hang on a moment. Lille, are you seriously reading my mind?” Charles asked with a hint of panic, deflecting her question. Unlike his flustered face and voice, his thoughts calmly flowed into her mind like a gentle river.

“At first, I was simply proud of her. I enjoyed watching her grow and learn. The first time I saw her in a different light was when she cried for me after seeing my memories.”

Charles’s heart was tender and honest. His aura felt wonderful, like the surface of a still, clear lake—far from the turmoil she’d felt when she tapped into his nightmare.

“I knew for sure that I loved her when she told me to destroy the watch. I thought, with her at my side, I wouldn’t be scared of living anymore.”

Lille could never have even imagined he felt that way about her.

“But I have a certain responsibility as her mentor, plus she sees me as a parent. She’ll go on to meet many more people in life; I don’t want to hold her back. I need to keep these feelings buried, so that one day, she’ll be able to leave this house with no regrets. That’s my duty.”

Charles’s pain, loneliness, and love spilled into her heart until it was completely full. He gave her everything he could, never expecting a single thing in return. Even after his love had shifted from platonic to romantic, he hadn’t treated her any differently; his entirely selfless nature had prevailed over his own feelings.

“Master Charlie...” she said, her voice cracking. She started to sob, an unthinkable happiness overwhelming her. She had never known that crying with joy would feel so warm and encompassing.

“Lille...did you hear everything?” he asked anxiously, watching her with uncertain eyes.

“Master Charlie,” Ark said, catching his attention. “Just so you know, Lille didn’t mean to read your mind just now. It happened because *you* wanted her to know. She didn’t have to do anything at all.”

“I did that...?” He blinked.

Thinking back, Lille realized that she hadn’t tried to read his mind when she witnessed his nightmare, either. She’d always thought that was strange, but what if he’d been unconsciously hoping to share his pain with someone...?

“Now that that’s out of the way, you gotta say it yourself. Your feelings are mutual, right? What’re you so scared of?” Leo said,

encouraging Charles. "Pull yourself together! You're our mentor, aren't you?"

"Leo..." Charles murmured, looking as though he'd just been slapped in the face. "...All right. I'll tell her properly. I should face up to this, too."

Slowly, Charles stood up.

"Lille," he began, taking her hands and bringing her to a stand as well. His eyes swam with tears, and Lille could see herself reflected in his jade-green irises. His gaze was fixated on her. She could barely breathe, a mixture of hope and fear roiling inside her. Her pulse thrummed in her ears, and she worried that she might faint.

"I love you. Out of every single girl in the world, you are the most precious to me," he declared.

Lille gawked at him in clear disbelief, her mouth hanging open as she struggled to find words. "Me too... I love you more than anyone else in the world!" she exclaimed, flying into Charles's arms with a huge grin. He caught her as if it were the most natural thing ever.

"...This puts me in a weird position. I told myself this could never happen, but I'm so ecstatic right now that I don't know if I could go back..." Charles said, his tone breathy and nervous.

Lille could hear his heartbeat through his chest. When she noticed that it was beating at the same pace as her own, tears welled in her eyes yet again. She was so overcome with love for the beautiful man in her arms that she didn't know how to process the situation.

If only time would stand still.

"Honestly," Ark sighed. "Those two sure are a handful."

"You've got that right," Leo agreed. "I can't believe I even sacrificed my own heart for this."

"You're a good guy, Leo."

"Yeah, well... I'll just find an even cuter girl at school and make her my girlfriend instead. Lille's missed her chance!" Although he was putting on a brave front, tears collected in the corners of Leo's eyes as he spoke.

"Leo, Ark... Thank you both," Lille said earnestly.

"Nah, you don't need to thank us. If you two kept repressing your emotions, it would've created even more issues for all of us," Ark said, grinning mischievously.

All of a sudden, Lille remembered what he'd mentioned in the past: "Familiars can sense their masters' emotions." It was entirely possible that Ark had known about both Charles and Lille's feelings for a long time.

"Oh, by the way... I forgot to say this before, but apparently, I don't actually have to stay in the school dorms," Leo added offhandedly.

"What?" Lille and Charles reacted at the same time, taken aback by Leo's casual revelation. Ark rested his chin on his hands and smirked.

Don't tell me—was he just pretending to be sad this whole time?

"You only have to stay at school for the beginning of the term. After that, so long as you know how to teleport, you can stay wherever you want. It's a new rule," he explained. "So, I'll learn teleportation faster than anyone ever has, and come back home as soon as I can. Wait for me, okay?"

"But, what about your family?" Charles wondered.

"I mean... I think you guys would be worse off without me than they are. You wouldn't get anything done without me, so I'll come back out of the kindness of my heart," he said, puffing his chest out.

"Leo..." Lille beamed, touched. "That means a lot to us. You'll come back soon, won't you? We'll be waiting for you."

The thought that her family wouldn't be separated sent a rush of joy through her, relief blossoming in her chest like a flower in springtime.

...Wait a moment...

The answer she had been searching for suddenly presented itself.

"Master Charlie? There's one more thing I want to say," she said, steeling herself.

"Sure. What is it?"

"For a long time, I've been wondering...how can I fall in love with you, but still be family to you?" she admitted. Ever since the seamstress at The Three Needles had alluded to the possibility, the question had been weighing on her mind. "But I think I know what the answer is now."

I'm sure this is what she meant.

She knelt down on one knee in front of Charles. She put her left hand to her heart and took his hand with her right. When she

read fairy tales, that was what the prince always did when he asked a similar question.

“Master Charlie... Please make me your bride!”

There it was: how to fall in love *and* be a family. How to stay at each other’s sides forever. After all—married couples weren’t family until they made that decision. Lille couldn’t believe she’d forgotten something so obvious.

“Wha—?” Charles gaped, utterly lost for words. His body was completely rigid.

“Master Charlie? H-Hello...?” she said anxiously.

After a tense moment of silence, Ark burst into peals of laughter. Leo was trying his hardest to suppress a laugh, too, his cheeks ballooning with air.

“L-Lille...” Ark said, gasping in between laughs. “Usually the guy’s the one to pop the question...”

“Plus, where did you even learn to do that...?” Leo spluttered.

“Oh, really?” Lille blinked. Nothing she’d read ever said that a woman couldn’t ask for a man’s hand in marriage. Was it some sort of unspoken rule? Though, quite frankly, she didn’t care either way.

“What’s your answer, Master Charlie?” she asked, ignoring the chuckles in the background.

“M-My answer? Oh, uh...” he stuttered, shuffling backward a little as Lille cornered him.

“Anyway, we’ll get out of the way and leave you two to yourselves. Make sure you think of a proper answer, all right, Master Charlie?” Ark grinned. “You can’t leave Lille to make all the effort by herself.”

“Yeah! Not to put any pressure on you, Master Charlie, but I’m sure you remember how people usually express their affection when they reply to a proposal,” Leo giggled, trailing after Ark as they both left the living room with mischievous grins on their faces.

Thus, the two of them were alone. A sense of déjà vu lingered in the awkward silence.

“Lille...”

“Y-Yes?” she answered, her breath failing her when she heard him say her name. His gaze was so serious that she wasn’t entirely certain he wasn’t angry with her.

“You always catch me off guard. You come up with ideas I could never even imagine, suggesting things like it’s nothing.”

“...I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

Did I go too far?

It was only natural that he thought it too early to consider marriage. Her shoulders drooped despondently, only to find herself in Charles's arms the very next moment.

"And *that's* how I know life will never be boring with you at my side. With so much to look forward to, I might even forget my past."

Her head snapped up, and she peered into his eyes. "Master Charlie... Does that mean you'll...?" she hinted, watching a gentle smile form on his face.

"I'll buy you a ring as soon as I can. Normally, we'd have one beforehand, but...that doesn't matter," he said, still smiling. "Lille, will you marry me? Will you stay with me forever?"

"...Of course I will," she replied tearily. Charles responded with a heart-meltingly tender gaze, and Lille knew what she had to do next. Timidly, she raised her chin toward him, and he pulled her closer as he leaned in.



Ah.

When she felt a soft pressure on her lips, her eyes fluttered shut. She savored the moment of her very first kiss.

I can't even tell whose mana's whose anymore.

Although their mana was the same color, Charles's was usually brighter. But with each kiss Charles planted on her lips, their jade-green light mingled and merged until it became one huge, sparkling ocean.

"I love you. I love you so much, Lille." With those words of adoration, kisses fell on her lips, cheeks, and collarbone like raindrops.

She smiled. "I love you too."

They lost count of how many sweet kisses they shared, and each time they pulled away, they beamed at each other. Lille thought she wouldn't mind if their strawberry tart-flavored kisses lasted forever. However...

"I do apologize for being late! I expect the farewell party's over by now."

The front door opened with a *wham*, and August came striding into the room, out of breath. Both Lille and Charles froze, their arms still around each other. August ogled at them briefly in astonishment before his face relaxed into a pleased smirk.

"A-Ahem! I just recalled I have some urgent business to attend to, so I shall be on my way. Enjoy yourselves," August said stiffly, clapping his hands together in mock realization. He backed out of the house, and softly closed the front door behind him.

"Wait! Master August!" Charles shouted, stumbling after him as Lille rushed to keep up. Amidst her embarrassment, she was comforted by the thought that the moment would be something to laugh about later. With Charles, it always was.

I've been in love with him since the very first day we met.

And no matter what the future held, that love would never die.



"**ARE** you sure about changing the shop's name, Master Charlie?"

Charles had created a new sign to replace the one hanging above the front door of the magic item shop.

"I'm sure," he said confidently. "It took me about two seconds

to think up the original name, anyway. If the new name makes you happy, then that's all that matters to me."

Charles used magic to levitate the new sign while Lille watched from off to the side, giving him directions until it was sitting in the right place above the shop door. As she used her left hand to gesture, a ring sparkled on her finger. Charles wore the same one.

"How long are you going to keep calling me that, incidentally?" Charles asked, brushing the dust off his robe after a job well done. "I'm not a teacher anymore, you know."

"I know, but technically, you *are* still teaching me magic..."

"Then save it for class." He pouted, walking away in a huff. Lille leapt forward to catch him by the sleeve.

"Wait! Ch— ...Charles," she called out to him, her cheeks turning crimson. When he turned back to look at her, his pout had been replaced by a grin.

"A gold star for effort," he chuckled, rewarding her with a sweet, gentle kiss.



WITH the new sign hanging above the door, they opened for business that day. Every customer who noticed the name change congratulated them, and Lille and Charles joked that they would be saying "thank you" for the next few weeks more than they'd ever said it in their entire lives.

Many people with various issues came to them for advice that day. It was a taste of what life would be like from that point on. Alongside Charles, she would try to help every single person that visited the shop, whether they came the following day, or years later.

At Lille & Charles's Magic Item Shop, the promise of a happy future shone brighter than ever.

Afterword

HELLO, everyone! It's nice to meet you. I'm Hiyoko Kurisu.

I'm a Japanese author with a love for fantasy, but I also write novels with a heavy focus on tasty food, work, and romance. In the past, I've also written about Japanese gods and *yokai*. (If you're interested in my other works, please feel free to do an online search for “栗栖ひよ子,” my name in Japanese!)

In Japanese, *hiyoko* means “chick.” I chose it as my pen name because I feel like I actually share quite a few similarities with baby chickens.

This is the first time my work has ever been published in English, so I'm very excited to be able to share my stories with English speakers.

In *Rapunzel of the Magic Item Shop*, I packed the story full of tropes that I'm a big fan of—sorcerers, apprentices, magic items, girls growing up... I hope you all enjoyed it just as much as I did!

Throughout the novel, “family” is a theme that comes up a lot. I think found family is something that kindles a certain warmth in many people, so I really hope you could sense that through Lille's story.

One of the reasons I'm so proud of this story is thanks to all the distinctive characters who drive it. Not only Charles and Lille, but everyone around them, too. Which character is your favorite, I wonder? When I've asked that question before, I was surprised to hear how popular Ark is! I guess he did play a pretty vital part in the plot in the end.

There were some pretty dark scenes too, weren't there? When the English publishers approached me, I was a little worried that those scenes would put people off, but I was relieved to hear that most readers from English-speaking countries have actually grown up reading dark fantasy. In Japan, hardly any schools teach fantasy books in literature class, so I'm extremely jealous!

I'm active on Twitter @chrishiyoko, so if you liked *Rapunzel of the Magic Item Shop*, feel free to let me know your thoughts. Don't

worry if you can only speak English—I don't mind!

Finally, I would like to say a big thank you to Imoichi, the illustrator for this novel; Kai Sadler, the translator; and Charis Messier at Cross Infinite World, the publishing company.

I hope that one day you'll be able to read even more of my works in English!

-Hiyoko Kurisu



AS THE VILLAINESS, I REJECT THESE HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

REINCARNATED AS THE LAST OF MY KIND

STORY BY: KIRI KOMORI
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SERIES | VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



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STORY BY: KEI MISAWA
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Can Magic Change Her Future?
This is the story of Princess Annabel's second chance at life, and her drive to stop the destruction of her kingdom.



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APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

STORY BY: FEHU KAZUNO
ILLUSTRATION BY: JUN
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Takuto reincarnates into his favorite strategy game as the commander of an evil civilization! Will his kingdom building strategies prove just as good in a real world?

**HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND
MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO
MAKE A LOVE POTION!**
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
SERIES / VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, straight-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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